



Mad World by Harleyquinnzelz

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Summary: 'Surely something must be growing here, right' In which something dark and dangerous lurks in Derry and it is up to a group of friends to stop IT, whatever the cost. Or in which Annie Jackson learns that there are some people worth fighting for, no matter how scared you are. 'Because otherwise, how do you forgive yourself for your rotting' EddiexOC

1. Annie Jackson Takes a Trip

Annie Jackson Takes a Trip

Evenings were devoted to the sacred art of front-porch sitting and the sipping of sweet tea, when the orchestra of the night, the bullfrog croaks and the cricket chirps and the ringing of cicadas, would rise into a cacophony all around her and Annie Jackson would sit and listen, eyes closed and heartbeat steady in her chest and she and the world around her seemed to become *one*.

There were miles of forest around her home, a large Antebellum nestled carefully amongst the trees, and at night it seemed every creature hidden amongst those leaves and limbs came alive to sing to her. They seemed to say, *You may be alone, Annie, but you aren't really. You have us, Annie. You always have us.*

It was one of the things Annie loved about this house, but it was not the *only* thing. She loved the big wraparound porch and the long driveway, the only entrance leading to Annie's secret world, her magic castle hidden within the enchanted forest. She loved the huge kitchen with the old wood stove in the corner, even if she never used it, more in favor of the modern gas stove. She loved the grand foyer with its crystal chandelier. She loved the massive magnolias and willows that seemed to fight for dominance in the front yard, casting the property with some kind of wonderland splendor. *Here* you could find all kinds of fairies and nymphs and sprites. *Here* you could find magic of all sorts and perhaps you would find the most elusive creature herself, *Annie Jackson* holed up inside a home that was much too big for one person on her own.

That's what Chantelle Stevens had told Annie ten years prior when Annie had purchased the property. She had shaken her head and rolled her eyes and asked Annie what she wanted some old house like that for anyway when she could rent out a modern and tasteful flat in the city. She had told Annie that she would get lost in a place like this, all alone with nobody to find her.

Annie hadn't quite known how to explain to Chantelle then that perhaps she was already lost in the first place.

When Annie had bought this house, still high on her exhilaration of success, she had not intended to live in it alone. She had expected right from the very beginning that when she got married they would live right here, in this historic home with its big fireplaces and hardwood floors. They would raise their kids here, would have cookouts in the backyard and eat dinners in the dining room. Here, Annie Jackson would have a second go at having a family and perhaps on this do-over nothing would be around to fuck it up.

She supposed that had been subconscious though because Annie Jackson had not thought about the stone that had caused the ripples that had torn her family apart. She had only been a kid then.

As a matter of fact, Annie had not thought about being a kid in *years*, not until her phone had started to ring, the sound startling her out of her reverie. She had checked the number and wondered who on Earth could be calling her from Maine of all places. She did not know anyone in Maine, not since her mother had died there some five years prior, and even then she had never gotten calls from her mother.

Any calls about work would come through Chantelle but they certainly wouldn't come this late and so it was more out of curiosity than anything that had Annie picking up the phone.

"Hello?" She had asked, carefully polite. Suppose they had the wrong number? Better to let them know now than the have them blowing up her phone trying to reach so-and-so.

"Hello. Is this Annie Jackson?"

"Yes."

Okay, so scratch that, not a wrong number. Perhaps a potential client had gotten hold of her personal number and given it a call. Annie pursed her lips at the thought. It was too late for anyone to be making a business call. Maybe they did things differently up North, but down South, you showed some consideration for-

"It's Mike Hanlon."

It seemed even the frogs and the crickets and the cicadas fell silent

around her and all Annie could hear was her heart *beatbeatbeating* in her chest, too fast to be healthy, and for the first time in nearly thirty years, Annie felt fear run down her spine like the coldest winter. She felt like she might freeze from the fear, might die from it.

"Hello? Annie?"

"I'm here," she breathed, clutching the phone like a lifeline. She reached blindly with her other hand, searching for the sweating glass of tea, desperately needing something to soothe her dry throat.

Derry, Maine, she thought. *My God, but it's been a long time since I've thought of Derry.*

And why not? Derry suddenly seemed to be the place that contained all of her worst childhood memories, contained within like a snow globe. *But*, she thought, *it also seemed as if it might contain some of her best memories as well.*

At her feet, as if sensing his master's unease, Renly raised his head from his nap, looking up at her with some concern. Annie was reminded, inexplicably, of her childhood dog Ghost and a shudder ran up her spine.

She tilted her glass back and drank and drank until there was nothing left but ice cubes. She needed something stronger, needed something strong enough to fend off the memories she felt brimming just below the surface now, memories that Annie thought perhaps she did not want back at all.

"Mike Hanlon," Annie said finally, her voice sounding light and airy and a little erratic. "Goddamn Mike Hanlon, it's been a helluva long time."

Yes, it had been. A helluva long time, what felt like a whole *lifetime* had passed since then.

"Yes," he agreed. "Too long."

Not long enough, Annie thought, fighting off the urge to laugh and tell him he had called the wrong number after all and that as far as Mike Hanlon was concerned Annie Jackson was dead, Annie Jackson was

gone, and any news he had for her he could keep to himself, thank you very much.

Because Annie felt suddenly as if some part of her knew what Mike was calling about, felt as if some part of her had known for weeks and had been anticipating exactly this.

"Well go on then, Mike," Annie told him tiredly. "You'd better give me the news."

"It's happening again," Mike told her finally. "Like when we were kids. Do you remember?"

Remember? What Annie remembered was gut-wrenching, all-consuming fear that made her insides coil up inside her. That's what she remembered. And this Mike Hanlon... he was somebody she had known then, in this other life, in this other time.

"No," she told him honestly. "Not exactly. I remember being scared though. It was something bad, wasn't it?"

At her feet, Renly whined, getting to his feet and pressing his cold nose into her hand, offering what little comfort he could. Annie reached up and began to pet him absently.

"Yes," Mike said. "We made a promise back then, all those years ago."

She remembered standing in a circle, gripping Stan Uris' hand in her left and Eddie Kaskpbrak's in her right and being filled then with the strongest sense of love for this circle of people around her, so strong it was overwhelming. She would have fought for them back then, would even have been willing to die for them. They had been her best friends once upon a time, and on that hot summer day in the Barrens, they had cut their palms and gripped each other's hands and made a promise, a swear. If it ever came back, they would come back to Derry, and they would kill it. Kill it. Kill *IT*.

Annie sucked in a breath, her heart starting back up with the drum solo in her chest while Mike patiently waited for her answer on the other end of the phone.

"I remember," she told him, feeling suddenly like a thirteen-year-old

girl again.

Mike had lived right next door to her, she remembered suddenly. Their fathers had been friends. Daddy used to go over and help Mr. Hanlon get that damned old Ford of theirs running again each year when it would get pulled out of its hibernation at the beginning of each Spring.

"I'm sorry to have to ask this Annie," Mike began, and to his credit he sounded as if he really was. "Will you come?"

She thought of him as he had been then, quick as a whip, but an outsider just like the rest of them had been. He had been a sweet boy, a thoughtful boy. He didn't want to have to ask her to come any more than she wanted to agree to do it. But they both knew how this song and dance would go, how it had to go.

"Well I don't guess I have much of a choice," she mused. "We promised. We all did. Have you talked to the others? Will they come?"

"I've talked to some of them, yes," Mike told her, sounding relieved by her answer. "They'll come, I think. All of them. At least, I hope they will."

"Yes," Annie agreed, feeling suddenly with absolute conviction that they all had to be there. "I hope so too."

Almost without thinking, Annie stood from the chair, grabbing her glass and heading for the front door, Renly half a step behind her as she entered her hideaway, her secret castle where nobody was meant to find her.

But Mike Hanlon had found her alright, and he had brought a whole army of demons with him.

"Well I guess I'd better make some travel arrangements," Annie told him. "Louisiana is a long way from Maine."

"I'd suppose you'd better," he agreed with a humorous laugh. "Anything I can do to help."

"Sure," she told him. "Reserve me a room at the Townhouse and make sure there's a damn big bottle of Malibu waiting for me. I think I'm going to need it."

They said their goodbyes and Annie headed straight to the kitchen, her gut clenching in anticipation at what felt suddenly like the death march of a woman heading to the gallows. *Here she is ladies and gentlemen, the woman you've all been waiting for, about to make the last trip of her whole life. It's time for Annie Jackson to head home, time for her to head home at long last.*

Well okay, okay perhaps it was, but if you think Annie Jackson was about to go through this whole sordid business sober then boy do I have a bridge to sell you.

She opened her laptop on the edge of the kitchen island and clicked into her favorite travel site before heading to the cabinet and fetching a wine glass. She had opened up the fridge to pull out her bottle of Rosé waiting inside but thought better of it at the last minute and grabbed the bottle of Malibu instead.

Wine was all very well and good for casual drinking, but Malibu was what Annie drank when we wanted to get absolutely rat-faced drunk and forget her own goddamned name because Annie liked the taste of coconut rum and she could drink *a lot* of it. Enough to forget her name, maybe enough to become somebody else if she really tried. Annie had never gotten that close in the past but tonight Annie was considering taking up the drinking sport, was thinking of going for the gold.

Who is Annie Jackson? she thought with a shrill little giggle. *Sorry, don't know her.*

Renly didn't like this at all it seemed, the dog pacing restlessly behind her as Annie poured more than a generous helping of rum right into her wineglass.

Ghost had done that too, whenever Annie had been scared or anxious. She spent a whole lot of time back then feeling scared or anxious.

Ghost had been a damned good dog, Annie thought with a fond

smile. Good in the way that dogs are good in the movies, brave and loyal. He had saved her life three times that summer, at *least* three times. And maybe saved her life after that summer too, when she and Daddy had escaped from the black hole that Mama had become one winter night, when she had threatened to consume everything around her and had come at Annie with a crazed look in her eye and the demand that Annie stay *right there with her goddamnit, so help me Paul you aren't taking my daughter out of this house.*

But so help me, Paul Jackson had done just that, loading Annie into the pickup after Ghost had taken a chunk out of her mother's arm for grabbing Annie's wrist with a force she had not prior believed her mother to be capable of.

And when Annie and Daddy had escaped out into the bitter cold night, Ghost had been right on Annie's heels, leaping up into the cab of the truck with her as Mama ran out yelling that *If you leave then you stay gone goddamnit, don't you ever come back here again!*

And Annie hadn't goddamnit, had stayed gone because she was convinced then, as she was convinced now that she would die in Derry, just as her mother had died.

She hadn't even gone to the funeral, bitter and angry at her mother as she was. Even with the woman dead, Annie couldn't escape that anger.

Renly whined again and Annie smiled down at the dog, reminded once more of Ghost, despite the two dogs not looking much alike, nevermind the fact that they were both German Shepherds. Ghost had been white as snow but Renly was dark-haired, more traditionally colored. But like Ghost, he was a good dog, one of the best dogs the world had ever seen, Annie thought vaguely.

Yes, Ghost had saved her life that summer, had been willing to die for her and, Annie supposed, she maybe would have died for that dog, because that's what you do when you love something. When you *really* love something.

She loved Ghost, and she loved Renly too. Dogs were safe to love, loved back with an unconditional ferocity that Annie found to be

mostly unrivaled within her own species. It's why she preferred Renly's company to most humans. But she had had friends who were loyal back then, oh yes she had. Friends who she loved fiercely and friends who had loved her fiercely back, and then there had been... *what?*

She felt something else there, blocked from memory but so *achingly* close, and it felt like the answer to a question she had not even known she'd been asking. She had had friends, and she had had something *more*.

She took a drink of rum and reached down to pet Renly absently again. "Okay bud," she told him. "I think you'd better just stay here at home, where it's safe."

But then she looked down at him, gazing up at her with those big, sweet brown eyes of his and was struck by the image of Ghost leaping at something, of Ghost with blood at his mouth and fire in his eyes, Ghost protecting her and loving her and being there with her and Annie thought, *Okay, better not. Okay, you're coming with me, bud, because like it or not, I guess we're in this together*. But deep down, maybe Annie was just afraid to go alone, and Renly had been her most constant companion in recent years, holed away in this too-big house with nothing else but scratchy old records and unfinished paintings for company.

With a resigned sigh, Annie turned back to her computer and got the number of the airline, choosing to call them instead. She had traveled enough times with Renly in tow to know the deal by now.

Actually, funnily enough, she had taken Renly to the vet earlier in the week to get checked for a clean bill of health, intending to fly him with her to a gallery opening in Atlanta over the weekend. Damn, another thing to worry about, Chantelle would have to postpone that. Still, it was almost spooky, like it was meant to happen.

Finally, somebody answered the phone and, over the next twenty minutes, Annie haggled with them over getting herself and Renly onto the plane, claiming the last seat in first class and the last spot in cargo for a dog crate on the next flight to Portland. She would have to pack and fly like the devil to get to the airport in time, but Annie

thought she could make it.

After hanging up with the airline, Annie made another call, this time to a rental place in Portland claiming the very last SUV they had available. Things just kept falling into place and it sent a chill down Annie's spine.

You just get yourself packed and try not to think about it, she thought, immediately setting into action, leaving her wine glass full of rum on the kitchen island, marooned and forgotten there while she headed upstairs to start shoving things into a suitcase.

Jeans, shirts, underwear, pajamas, Annie hardly stopped to consider what she was shoving inside of her bag, paying more attention to the fact that she was likely about to get ripped a new one by her manager.

Hitting the call button, Annie balanced the phone between her ear and shoulder, waiting for Chantelle to finally pick up with an annoyed *hello*.

"I can't make the gallery opening this weekend," Annie told her immediately, listening to the way Chantelle sucked in her breath through her teeth.

Annie had known Chantelle Stevens for going on now fifteen years when she had first really started to gain momentum as an artist. Three years out of art school, Annie had only just managed to cross the bridge between *starving* artist and just a regular artist. Chantelle was five years older than her, had been born and raised in the Bronx, and if there was any single person on Earth that Annie didn't want to piss off, it was Chantelle Stevens.

Even now, Annie could picture her in her head, sitting on the ultra-sleek, ultra-modern, ultra-chic leather couch in the living room of her equally classy New Orleans flat, cigarette dangling from the corner of her mouth and a glass of bourbon in hand.

"What the *hell* do you mean you can't make the gallery opening?" Chantelle asked enough toxicity in her tone to make Annie wince.

"Something has come up," Annie explained to her, tossing socks into the bag and moving into her bathroom. "I have to fly up to Maine tonight."

"What kind of business do you have in Maine? *What* has come up?"

"Can't I just say that something has come up and leave it at that?" Annie asked hopefully, piling toiletries up onto the counter.

What the hell was she supposed to say to Chantelle? She had to go and fight the ghosts from her past? *HA!* Annie was so sure that would go over great.

"*Anne...* "

So that was a no. Heaving a sigh, Annie brought the small mountain of toiletries over to the suitcase, tossing them in and zipping the bag up with little regard to organizing them.

She hated it when people called her Anne, and that was what everyone seemed to want to call her now. *Anne Jackson*. It sounded so... cold. Sterile. Annie hated that name, had been Annie as long as she'd been alive, and didn't care much one way or the other if it sounded like a little girl's name.

"An emergency came up in the town where I used to live, in Derry. I have to go, Chantelle."

"Your mother is already dead," Chantelle pointed out. She had been one of the few people who had supported Annie's decision *not* to go to her mother's funeral.

"Yes," Annie sighed again. "Look it's not about her, okay. It's something else, and I can't tell you. I just need you to make whatever excuses you need to make to get me out of the gallery opening."

"But-"

"Look," Annie interrupted her. "In fifteen years, have I ever flaked out on you? Have I ever made excuses to *not* do my job?"

"No," Chantelle admitted with a sigh. "I'll do what I can. When will

you be back?"

"I don't know," Annie grabbed her bag off the bed and started out of the room, flipping the switch behind her. At the last minute, she paused, turning to look over her shoulder at her bedroom, comforting and cozy. There was no telling when she would see it again. *If* she would see it again.

"Annie!"

"Chantelle," she countered. "I gotta do this, okay. I just have to. Do you understand?"

"No," the other woman grumbled, sounding suddenly very tired. "I can't believe after all these years, you're finally showing your true colors, just another batshit insane artist."

"Maybe," Annie told her wryly. Maybe she *was* batshit, after all.

"You call me when you get back. And whatever you're doing Annie... be careful."

Annie made it to the airport with no time to spare, and it wasn't until she settled back into her seat that she allowed herself to breathe, closing her eyes and just *existing* for a long moment until she was interrupted by the flight attendant asking her if she'd like something to drink.

Annie sent her away quickly leaned back in her chair, feeling that cold sense of dread already working itself into a knot in her stomach. Better not to put alcohol on top of that.

She thought suddenly of that glass filled with rum, still sitting on the kitchen island, forgotten there in her haste and *laughed* making the woman sitting in the seat beside her look at Annie in alarm.

Gripping the arms of her seat, Annie leaned back and closed her eyes once more, deciding it best to try and get some sleep. After all, there would be no telling when she would get the chance again.

Derry, Maine felt suddenly a million miles away, a world away, a

lifetime away.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: Okay so some of you may remember when I first attempted this story, back when IT Chapter One came out. Well here you have my second attempt, a rewrite of sorts. I'm twenty-four chapters deep into the rewrite and I'm so excited to be posting this!

So this story will be updated every Thursday! If you want to see any of the things I've made for this story, you can follow me on my tumblr, at [harleyquinnzelz . tumblr . com](http://harleyquinnzelz.tumblr.com)! I'd really love for you guys to tell me what you think! I love Annie a lot and I'm just super pleased to finally be sharing this story with you guys, as it means a lot to me.

2. School's Out For Summer

School's Out For Summer

It had been during the summer between third and fourth grade that Annabel Jackson and her family first moved to Derry, Maine from the small town of Grand Isle in southern Louisiana. It had seemed as if the family had simply shown up out of nowhere one day, settling down on one of the farms on Whitcham Road and unloading their belongings from the back of the truck.

Upon first glance, the family of four seemed almost perfect, *too perfect*. Blonde-haired and blue-eyed, every single one of them, Paul Jackson was tall and broad-shouldered with arms corded with muscle, Shirley Jackson was lovely and statuesque with hair the color of corn silk that waterfalled down her back, and between the two of them they had two beautiful daughters, Annie and Amy, both of whom looked remarkably similar to their mother.

In that first summer, Annie had been on the precipice of turning nine while Amy was only three years old but small for her age and frequently ill. Rumour quickly spread throughout town that the sudden exodus of the family from Louisiana to Maine was because the youngest daughter had been diagnosed with cancer. This had not seemed so unusual, Derry Home Hospital had improved by leaps and bounds in recent years and offered excellent cancer treatments.

It was not until many years later, when Annie really started to think about it, that she would realize just how strange it all was that of all the towns in all the country her parents would choose little Derry, Maine. But at nine years old, all Annie knew was that she had been pulled away from the town where she had spent all of her very short life.

There was no beach in Derry, no sound of crashing waves to lull her to sleep. The closest thing they had to the ocean in Derry was the Penobscot River which, her father told her, eventually emptied out into the ocean, the *actual* ocean, not the Gulf of Mexico.

That was all very well and good, but eventually was not *here*, and the

most interesting place in Derry was the impossibly lush, forested place that most everyone in town called the Barrens.

It was down into the Barrens that Annie retreated each day during that summer, fleeing from the sterile environment of her own home in favor of the shock of green forest and muggy warmth.

Annie had to grow up quickly following Amy's diagnosis, had learned that she needed to help when she could and stay out of the way when she couldn't.

Annie spent a whole lot of time back then staying out of the way.

That was how she first came across the others one day when she had ventured down to the quarry to explore. With a pink cowgirl hat on and a shiny sheriff badge pinned to the front of her pretty blue dress, Annie was all set to play the part of a cowgirl in the wild, wild west.

She had heard them before she ever saw them, their voices carrying through the thick undergrowth, and when she finally emerged from the brush she was pleasantly surprised to find four boys around her age trying to skip rocks.

She had hesitated there, just beyond the greenery, unsure what to say, until one of the boys, the one wearing glasses, had looked up to see her there.

"Holy shit!" He cried, catching the attention of the others and making Annie jump.

Now it seemed she was even more unsure what to say, not quite knowing how to respond to somebody her age using a word that she *definitely* was not allowed to use.

"Hello," she said finally, wringing the hem of the skirt of her dress nervously between her hands. Part of her was tempted to retreat back into the trees. She hadn't been mentally prepared to meet anybody new down here after all. But the other part of her was so grateful to have found other kids her age and that was the part that had her offering these boys a small smile. "I'm Annie. My family just moved to Derry."

There was a moment of silence as the four boys stood before her, seemingly sizing her up before one finally stepped forward and offered her a friendly smile. "Hi Annie," he began. "I'm B-Bi-Bill."

"I'm Richie," The boy who had originally noticed her spoke up now, stepping forward to seize her hand and giving it a vigorous shake, taking Annie aback. "This is Stan," he pointed first to the boy with the curly hair, "and Eddie," and finally to the last boy, who was smaller than the other three.

"I like your hat," Stan told her kindly and she offered him a beaming smile.

"Thanks!" She said. "I got it for my birthday!"

"Hey, w-we're skipping rocks. You w-wa-want to t-try?" Bill asked.

Annie nodded eagerly, glad to be included. "Yeah!" she said. "My Daddy showed me how!"

"Good," Richie said. "Then you can show us how."

And just like that, she had a group of friends with whom to start the new school year. They were her *best* friends, she would tell her family a week later while they were all sitting around the dinner table. She had never had *best* friends before, not like this, only girls who she had shared classes with in the past that Annie had played with because there had been few other options.

Nevermind the fact that her mother didn't like that she was running around with a group of boys, who cared? At least Annie wasn't alone. She hated being alone.

But it was *impossible* to feel alone with friends like hers, even after Bill lost Georgie, closely followed by Annie losing Amy later that month. While Annie's parents had drifted alone on their solitary islands of grief, she had her friends to turn to and Bill with whom to share her grief.

That had been months ago though, and Annie was doing much better now. It was the last day of school, after all, and in the face of impending summer, it was impossible *not* to be in a good mood.

Summer meant staying up late and sleeping in. Summer meant sunshine and swimming and warmth. And best of all, summer meant escaping the mausoleum that her home had become in the months following Amy's death and escaping down into the Barrens where Amy's ghost was not constantly hanging overhead.

She had been staring at the clock hanging over Mrs. Harlowe's desk for the better part of an hour, watching as the hands ticked down the minutes, her foot tapping impatiently. Richie sat at the front of the class, absently drumming his pencil against his desk, while Bill sat in the desk behind him, doodling on the cover of his notebook. Eddie was in the desk beside Annie's doing his best to pay attention to what Mrs. Harlowe was saying but even he was getting distracted.

"*Stop it!*" he hissed at Annie under his breath. Mrs. Harlowe was saying something about summer work now but Annie's foot was *tap-tap-tapping* away, making it impossible for Eddie to focus.

"What?" She blinked, looking at him innocently with those big blue eyes of hers. "I'm not *doing* anything."

"You *are*," Eddie insisted. "It's distracting."

"Eddie?" He looked up with a start, expression guilty, when Mrs. Harlowe said his name, looking at him with a frown. "Is there something more interesting you'd like to share with the class?"

"No ma'am," he answered automatically, hearing Richie snicker from his desk.

Mrs. Harlowe looked at him for a moment longer, eyes narrowed, before turning to address the rest of the class once more. Eddie immediately turned in his seat to glare at Annie who shrugged, smiling apologetically. At least she had stopped the incessant foot tapping.

This was not at all unusual, Annie and Eddie were good at distracting each other during class and, given the fact that they usually ended up sitting together, it was something the two of them had grown used to.

The sound of the final bell ringing cut off whatever Mrs. Harlowe was

saying about summer work and had the class leaping hurriedly to their feet, eager to get out of class.

"Sorry, Eddie," Annie offered, shouldering her pink backpack. The apology was genuine but it didn't matter one way or the other. Eddie never seemed to be able to stay annoyed at Annie for long.

"It's okay," Eddie told her with a sigh, sliding his own backpack onto his shoulder.

Bill and Richie worked their way back towards their two friends, fighting against the tide of other students until they finally reached them.

Bill was the tallest of their group of friends, with dark hair and bright blue eyes. He was cute, and might have been more popular if not for his stutter. It had been moderate before Georgie, but after his death it had gotten worse. Richie was shorter than Bill, with a head of curly black hair and thick-framed glasses that magnified his dark eyes. Eddie was shorter than either of them, but still taller than Annie, with brown hair that he usually combed neatly to the side and warm brown eyes.

Richie pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose before tilting his head towards the classroom door. "Let's get out of here," he advised, starting towards the door, the others following behind.

Without looking back, Annie reached out to grab Eddie's hand with her own, not wanting to get separated by the crowd of students. This wasn't unusual behavior from his friend, she had always been very open with offering forth affection, but still, Eddie felt his cheeks heat up. Luckily neither Bill nor Richie saw, otherwise Eddie knew he would never hear the end of it.

It had been an exhaustingly long school year, and it was clear that everyone was pleased to finally be free. The halls were flooded with students all chattering and making their way to the exits. The group of four fell in with the stream of students and Annie drifted back to walk beside Eddie instead of pulling him by the hand.

As far as friends went, Eddie guessed he had gotten pretty lucky.

Before he had made friends with Bill he had been picked on a lot, teased for being small and sickly. That hadn't changed, of course, Eddie was still bullied frequently, but making friends with Bill back in first grade had led Eddie to become friends with Richie and Stan as well. They were all bullied pretty relentlessly, but at least they had each other.

And then there was Annie, walking beside Eddie as if it was no big deal, as if she wouldn't have been better suited to running around with girls like Greta Bowie and Sally Mueller. He wasn't sure what he had done to deserve a friend like her, but whatever it was, Eddie was grateful for it. They were all his best friends, of course, but Annie was his best *best* friend. Even better was the fact that he knew that he was *her* best friend too. There was something comforting in that knowledge, knowing that it wasn't just one-sided.

"Are we still going down to the Barrens?" Annie asked eagerly. It was hardly a question worth asking though, the group went down there almost every day after school.

The Barrens were great because, for the most part, they were pretty much left alone down there, free to do whatever they wanted without fear that Henry Bowers or one of his asshole friends would show up to bother him. Most kids, Eddie knew, played ball behind the Tracker Brother's workshop after school or headed down to Bassey Park but there was nothing better than the feeling he got, running with his friends down in the Barrens, away from bullies and the anxious, watchful gaze of his mother.

"No," Bill shook his head. "S-Stan c-ca-can-"

"Stan can't," Richie cut him off, not giving Bill a chance to stutter through the sentence. "He has to *study*."

Richie never interrupted Bill out of meanness, and Eddie knew that Bill was oftentimes grateful for it because nobody hated Bill's stutter more than Bill himself. Before Georgie's disappearance that past October, Bill's stutter had been moderate, but since then it had gotten worse.

None of his friends minded, but that stutter often made Bill the butt

of jokes orchestrated by some of the meaner spirited kids at school.

"Study," Annie wrinkled her nose, clearly disgusted as if the word was somehow offensive. "It's *summer*."

"It's for his *Bar Mitzvah*," Eddie reminded her.

None of the rest of their little group was Jewish and so they were not quite sure *what* his Bar Mitzvah would entail. They had, of course, all been invited.

"*Riiiiight*," Annie blinked, pursing her lips slightly in thought. "How exactly does that work again?"

Annie had been the most supportive of Stan by far, not making nearly as many jokes at his expense as the others but she could frequently be quite absent-minded and often didn't remember the full explanation he had given her. Her heart was in the right place, though.

Eddie sighed, shaking his head with an exasperation he didn't actually feel before launching himself into the explanation. "Okay, so there's this church full of Jews, and Stan has to take this super Jew-y test."

"I knew that," Annie told him. "But like.... how does it work?"

"They slice the tip of his dick off," Eddie said matter-of-factly, watching with some amusement as her eyes stretched wide, first with surprise then with disgust.

"*What?!*"

"But then he'll have nothing left!" Richie interjected.

"*Richie!*" Annie admonished, though she still sounded slightly amused.

"Guys, wait up!"

Suddenly the man in question was pushing his way between Annie and Richie, slightly out of breath, obviously having chased them down the hall.

Stan was around the same height as Richie, with a head of curly hair. Today, like most other days, he was neatly dressed in cacky shorts and a well-ironed button-up.

"Hey Stan," Annie greeted him brightly, gracing him with a smile. "Were your ears burning?"

"What actually happens at a *Bar Mitzvah*?" Richie asked their friend. "Inquiring minds want to know," he tilted his head towards Annie who puffed her cheeks out in indignation.

"You don't know either!"

"Ed says you slice the tip of the d-d-dick off," Bill explained.

"Yeah," Richie nodded knowingly. "And then the Rabbi will pull your pants down and say to the crowd, '*Where's the meat?*'"

Stan sighed heavily, shaking his head, far too used to this sort of behavior by now. "At the *Bar Mitzvah* I read from the *Torah* and make a speech and suddenly I become a man."

"There's more funner ways to become a man," Richie said with a roguish grin. Annie rolled her eyes.

"More fun, you mean? I'm impressed you passed English class at all with grammar like that, Trashmouth."

"Oh gosh, *sorry Miss Jackson*," Richie shot back sarcastically. "I'll be sure to hit the books as soon as I get home. Don't want to fail the big test."

"Beep beep Richie," Annie deadpanned, earning a laugh from the others.

The two of them often argued back and forth like that, Eddie suspected because Richie liked to tease Annie so much. It was never out of cruelty though and for the most part, Annie took it all in stride. When they were younger, it had been different, Annie had been unused to Richie's brand of teasing and had reacted indignantly to all of it.

Annie opened her mouth to say something else but froze, her eyes landing on a group of boys standing on the other side of the hall. "Oh."

Henry Bowers and his friends. Even worse, Patrick Hockstetter was with them. The four boys had already seen the group and Patrick had locked eyes with Annie who shrunk subconsciously against Eddie's side, looking like a scared rabbit.

All of them hated Henry Bowers and their group, but Annie was *terrified*. She had good reason to be too, Eddie knew because Henry and Patrick seemed to take some sort of sick pleasure into making the girl cry.

There had been a time, two summers ago, when they had been down in the Barrens, playing in the water of the Kenduskeag. It had been one of the rare occasions where Henry Bowers and his gang had ventured down.

It had been Richie who had riled them up, smarting off to them in a very unwise way, but Eddie had long ago learned that Richie had no control over the words that streamed out of his mouth and it had been Annie who paid the price, Annie who had gotten shoved down and Annie who hit her temple hard against a rock.

That had been particularly terrifying, the sound her head had made when it hit and even worse had been the pitiful noise she had made, like an injured rabbit. Bowers and his friends had simply laughed, turning away to leave, though Eddie had also suspected it was them turning tail and running too because they had made a *girl* bleed and every single one of their parents would think that that was somehow worse than if they had pushed one of the boys down.

Annie had been crying then, pathetic sobs wracking her body, and when Eddie saw how badly she was bleeding he had promptly thrown up, feeling thoroughly ashamed of himself afterward.

Head wounds bled more, Eddie knew, but there had been *so much blood*, running in a river down Annie's face, into her eye and matting her hair against her face.

None of them had known what to do for her that day, except for Bill who had stepped up and taken charge, beginning to direct Annie out of the Barrens, despite the fact that she was shaking from fear and in pain. They had managed to get her into town and had stopped in the nearest store to call her dad who had come roaring up the street in his pickup with clear panic written on his face.

Annie had needed stitches that day, and there was still the ghost of a scar along her hairline to serve as a reminder of what happened when you got on the bad side of Henry Bowers and his friends.

When her father had asked Annie what had happened, she had sworn up and down that she had only fallen and had begged the others to go along with it as well, scared of what Henry or one of the others would do if she snitched. Even worse was the fact that it was *Patrick Hockstetter* who pushed her, and Annie insisted that *he* was even worse than Henry.

Now, Annie gave the group of boys a wide berth, often going out of her way to avoid them which was particularly hard given that Annie's family owned a farm not far from where Henry and his father lived.

Annie never said anything about it, but Eddie knew that she was always nervous to ride her bike home, nervous to pass the Bowers' place because it was like tempting fate. *Here I am, Henry! Come and have a go!*

Deciding it was probably best to not linger in the hallway, Eddie nudged Annie, urging her forward at a quicker pace.

As they began to move, Patrick's gaze shifted to Richie, who tensed up slightly as the older boy licked his lips and offered Richie a wink.

"*Shit,*" Richie breathed. "Think he'll sign my yearbook? '*Dear Richie, sorry for taking a hot, steamy dump in your backpack last month. Enjoy your summer!*'"

They turned to head down the stairs, losing sight of Henry and his friends, and finally, Annie could breathe again.

"Nah," she said. "They're too illiterate for that." '

Annie stepped out into the sunlight, taking a moment to revel in the warmth of the midday sun before following her friends down the front steps of the school. It had only been a half-day today, and the sun was shining brilliantly in a clear, blue sky.

All in all, it was the perfect doorway into summer.

Well, *okay* maybe not perfect. Perfect implied that kids were not going missing, implied that Georgie Denbrough had not disappeared, implied that Amy Jackson had not died.

In short, *perfect* implied that everything was fine in Derry and everything was definitely *not* fine.

Still, it was a beautiful day and with a whole summer of freedom to look forward to, it was easy to forget everything that had gone wrong over the last several months.

The others had gathered around one of the school's trash cans and were carelessly dumping the contents of their bags inside. As Annie approached she began to sort through her own with more care, dropping now useless folders and papers inside. The others watched her, Richie raising a brow as he shook his head.

"Just dump it all in," he told her impatiently.

"I don't want to throw *everything* away," she informed him matter-of-factly. Specifically, she did not want to throw away the layer of notes that had been passed between herself and her friends over that school year. They lined the bottom of her backpack like debris and when Annie got home she would carefully store them in an old shoebox beneath her bed.

Most of the notes had been passed between herself and Eddie, but there was a fair share from Richie and even a coveted few from Bill himself. *Those* she would likely re-read before carefully storing them away. There were even fewer from Stan who disliked passing notes in class, fearing that they would get caught and that he would get into trouble.

"This is the best feeling ever," Stan announced, sliding his backpack

back onto his shoulders.

Richie snorted. "Yeah? Try tickling your pickle for the first time."

Annie wrinkled her nose, rolling her eyes and exchanging an exasperated look with the others.

"Sometimes you astound me with your eloquence, Trashmouth."

Richie blinked blankly at her.

"*El-o-quence*," she said, sounding it out. "If you tried picking up a book sometime, you might know what it means."

"What do you guys wanna do tomorrow?" Eddie asked.

"*Oh!*" Annie looked over at him eagerly. "We could go to the quarry and swim!"

Swimming was, by far, Annie's favorite thing to do in the summer and at every available opportunity, she was trying to convince the boys to go down to the quarry or to come over to her house where they could splash around in the swimming hole.

Annie had practically grown up in the water and her father was always joking that it was a wonder than Annie had feet instead of fins. Annie had *loved* Grand Isle, had loved the beach and the sound of the waves and the ocean breeze in her hair. Most of all, though, she loved the water.

That had not changed since moving to Derry, the only difference was she had to settle for pools and swimming holes and that she had to wait longer for the weather to warm up

"I've got to start my training," Richie piped up, making the other four turn to look at him in confusion.

"What training?"

"*Streetfighter*," Richie informed them, adjusting his glasses.

Eddie furrowed his brow, looking puzzled. "Is that how you want to

spend your summer?" He asked. "Stuck in an arcade?"

"Better than inside your mother!" Richie shot back, raising a hand for Stan to high five. The other boy promptly shoved his hand down again.

"Guys, we have to g-go to the B-ba-barrens tomorrow," Bill reminded them, expression grave.

Annie frowned. She had briefly forgotten that they had promised Bill to go down to the Barrens to try and find Georgie.

If Annie were being honest, she thought Georgie was probably dead. She would never say this to Bill's face, of course, he would come to that realization in his own time. And until then, if it helped him to cope, she would help him to look for Georgie as he needed.

"Betty Ripsom's mom," Eddie tilted his head, making the others turn to see a woman standing with several police officers on the street in front of the school.

The woman had her hands clasped over her heart, almost like she was praying. She wore a hopeful expression on her face.

"Does she really expect to see her coming out of school?" Eddie asked, frowning.

"I don't know," Annie sighed.

Betty had been in their Social Studies class. They had never been close, but Betty was nice enough and was always eager to answer questions.

"As if Betty's been hiding in Home Ec for the last few weeks."

"Do you think they'll find her?" Stan asked them.

"Sure," Richie piped up. "In a ditch. All decomposed, covered in worms and maggots, smelling like Eddie's mom's underwear."

Eddie glowered at his friend, looking sickened. "Shut up," he snapped. "That's disgusting."

"She's not dead," Bill insisted. "She's m-m-missing."

"Sorry, Bill," Richie said immediately, tone much softer. "She's missing."

Annie wasn't so sure about that. Probably, all the missing kids were dead. Lord knows they had found enough bodies as of late. Chad Lowe, Cheryl Lamonica, Veronica Grogan, and Jimmy Cullum had already been found. Not only were they dead, but their bodies had also been savaged. Annie knew that there were a lot of adults who were afraid that there was some demented child-killer in Derry. There were others though, who believed none of the deaths or disappearances had anything to do with each other and *those* people, Annie decided, were especially stupid.

She wouldn't say any of this out loud though, not in present company, when Bill was so determined to believe that the missing could still be found. It was kind of sad really.

Annie turned to face the others again, opening her mouth to express some kind of condolence for poor Betty Ripsom's mother, when the sight of Patrick Hockstetter made her freeze, mouth agape, and eyes widening. Where Patrick was, his friends were not far behind and sure enough, here came Henry and the others, strolling up, intent on causing trouble.

She could run and even as the impulse struck her, Annie felt her limbs tensing, readying herself to make a mad dash somewhere, *anywhere*, as long as it was away from the bullies. But what kind of friend would that make her if she left them behind?

They can run too, she thought and frowned. They could, but they wouldn't and she didn't *want* to run either, hated the way her blood ran cold just at the sight of Henry Bowers and his friends.

Without thinking she reached up, brushing her fingers against her hairline where she knew her scar was. They had caused it, and they had laughed, maybe not realizing how bad the gash on her head had been, probably not caring. If Annie had felt compelled she could have told her dad who would have made a big deal out of it, no doubt, would have torn down the road in his old pickup to the Bowers' place

to raise nine kinds of hell.

But she hadn't. Annie had kept her mouth shut, partially because she feared how Henry would react if she did snitch but mostly because Amy was the kid who caused her parents to worry. Amy was the one who had always been sick, who was always the one going in and out of doctors' offices and hospitals. Amy was the one who occupied all of her parents' worries back then, and Annie wouldn't have felt right if they had made a bigger fuss over her.

Easier to lie and let things die down quietly. She had suspected though, that her dad hadn't believed her, but he hadn't pressed the matter and Annie had been grateful.

These days it still seemed like there wasn't any worry left for Annie, even with a potential child killer on the loose, but that was because all of her parents' emotions were spent up on grief.

They hardly seemed to notice Annie anymore.

"Nice frisbee, flamer," Patrick reached up, snatching the *kippah* off of Stan's head and slinging it through the window of a passing school bus.

Stan watched in dismay but didn't dare try to stand up to Patrick who was known for being particularly vicious.

Instinctively, Annie shifted closer to Eddie, trying to make herself appear smaller, less noticeable. Between them, she knew that neither she nor Eddie could do much against Henry or his friends but she at least felt more comfortable standing with her best friend.

Belch Huggins stepped up beside them, burping loudly into Eddie's ear. Eddie gagged audibly, shrinking away from Belch who laughed mirthfully.

Henry stood by, overseeing the actions of his squad of goons, ever the dutiful bully.

"Fuckin' losers," he scoffed, shoving Richie before turning away, the others following behind.

"You s-s-suck, Bowers!" Bill snapped, stepping after him, making Henry pause and turn back to face them.

Annie grimaced, taking a step back, not wanting to get caught up in *that*.

"*Shut up, Bill!*" Eddie hissed.

Henry took a slow step towards Bill, brows raised expectantly. "Did you s-s-say something, B-b-b-Billy?" He taunted. "You got a free ride this year 'cause of your little brother. Ride's over, Denbrough." He took another threatening step towards him but froze, looking past the group. Annie glanced over her shoulder to see that one of the police officers had taken notice and was watching Henry carefully.

Annie allowed herself a breath of relief. Even Henry was not so bold as to start anything in front of a police officer.

"This summer is gonna be a hurt train. For you and your pussy friends," Henry informed Bill, before licking his hand and pressing it against the side of Bill's face.

Annie grimaced, watching as the boys turned and walked away towards Belch Huggins' car, leaving them behind.

"I hate them!" She announced vehemently. Annie had never hated anyone before in her life, but she was certain, in that moment, that she hated Henry Bowers and his friends.

"I wish he'd go missing," Stan said quietly.

"He's probably the one doing it," Eddie was still glowering in the direction they had gone, watching as the group took off in the car.

Annie wasn't so sure about that, didn't think that Henry was smart enough to kill somebody without being caught, though she certainly believed he was *capable* of killing a person. It was one of the reasons he scared her so badly.

"We should go," Annie suggested. "Before he decides he didn't get his point across well enough."

She didn't really think he would dare come back to cause trouble, but if the police officers ended up leaving and he saw them still hanging around...

She turned, leading the way over to the rack where all of their bikes were chained up. Her own bike stood out starkly against the others, bright pink complete with a yellow oogah horn and a wicker basket with plastic daisies attached.

She climbed on, before turning to look back at Eddie. "You want to come over?" She offered. "We can swim."

He considered this offer for a moment before reluctantly shaking his head. "Better not," he told her. "My mom is expecting me home."

Annie frowned but didn't feel particularly surprised. Mrs. Kaspbrak was remarkably overprotective of Eddie and, to make matters worse, she *hated* Annie.

She turned to look at Bill and Richie, raising her brows expectantly. "What about you guys?" She asked, but they both shook their heads.

"I told my mom I'd clean out the attic," Richie said glumly.

With a sigh Annie nodded, resigning herself to the fact that she would have to go home alone. It wouldn't be so bad, she figured. Just go home and change and then go swim. The house *might* be as cold as the Arctic Circle, but outside was just as warm and pleasant as she could ask for.

Her mom wouldn't even *care*.

The boys climbed onto their own bikes and together they all began pedaling, each of them splitting off at different intervals to head towards their own homes until finally, it was just Annie, alone, heading towards a house that had progressively gotten colder and colder over the last eight months.

3. Something In The Water

Something In The Water

Paul Jackson had worked outside for most of his adult life. There had been a point, once he had started working when he had made his money working on the boats down in Grand Isle. Then, he had gotten the opportunity to work at one of the ranches in a town outside of Grand Isle and the rest had been history. So Paul had needed to drive nearly an hour to and from work every day. It was good work, and he had made an honest living, had been perfectly capable of caring for his wife and daughters.

Paul liked working with his hands, there was something comforting about it, and most of the work he did was methodical, easy to get lost in. But in Louisiana, Paul had worked for somebody else, had always had a boss to answer to and somebody to direct his actions. Since moving to Derry, Paul had worked only for himself.

It was freeing in a way, and far more rewarding to throw himself into *his* work on *his* own farm.

He was ashamed to admit it, but when they had moved up from Louisiana to Derry, he had almost been excited to have his own land, *at last*, his own farm. He dared not mention this to Shirl who believed that the *only* reason they should have been looking forward to moving to Derry was because of the better standard of care that Amy would receive at Derry Home Hospital.

Shirl had a notorious one-track mind, and once she had latched on to the notion of caring for Amy and being there for Amy and loving Amy, there had been little else that could distract her. That included their oldest daughter who, Paul had to admit, had often fallen to the wayside when it came to taking care of Amy.

And now? These days, Annie was rarely at home when she didn't need to be, and Paul couldn't say that he blamed her. Shirl spent most of her time in bed these days and Paul spent most of his time working and Annie was very often left on her own. Paul couldn't imagine that that was very easy on her.

He was surprised then when he heard the booming sound of Ghost's bark as the dog took off from the spot where he had been laying on the front porch, flying down the road to greet Annie. Paul had been peering under the front hood of his old Chevy and looked up with a start, surprised to see his daughter coming home so early.

She laughed lightly, reaching out to scratch Ghost behind his ear as she dismounted her bike, leaning it against the side of the house.

It was the last day of school, Paul remembered which explained why she was here so early but even still, he expected her to be running around with her friends. Paul had never said it out loud but he was thankful for the group of friends Annie had made, glad she had people she could be so close to. He didn't even really care that every single one of them was a boy.

"Hey!" He called, making Annie whirl around to face him. Paul grinned in amusement. It seemed Anne had not even realized he was there. "You're here early."

"The others were busy," Annie explained, fending off the excited licks that Ghost was currently trying to deliver to her face. "I thought I'd come home and go swimming."

Annie had always loved swimming ever since she was a little girl. She had practically grown up with the water and Paul could remember the way he used to lift her up onto his shoulders and plow into the waves, listening to Annie's delighted giggles.

"Sure," Paul told her. "Just make sure to come back up to the house in time to get in a bath before supper."

Annie offered him a small smile, carefully resigned, and nodded before turning to head up onto the porch and into the house, Ghost on her heels.

Paul heaved a sigh, watching her go. That was a more recent development, happening over the last several months since Amy had died. Annie had never been closed off from Paul and Shirl *before* Amy's death. Paul supposed that could have just been part of her getting older, but he doubted it.

The truth was, Annie didn't trust Paul and Shirl to worry about her anymore, didn't trust them to care about her and to fully commit to the role of parents. She hadn't said that to them, of course, and Paul didn't need her to. It had been written all over her face.

The home that Annie and her family had lived in since moving to Derry had originally seemed quaint and homey. The little yellow house on Whitcham road with the white shutters had seemed like something out of a movie, warm and inviting.

These days, walking inside was more like walking into Antarctica. Annie thought that *penguins* probably lived in warmer climates than her own home.

Walking inside, the house was dark and Annie knew immediately that her mother was laying down in her bedroom. The smell of something cooking drifted down the hall from the kitchen and Annie knew immediately that dinner was coming from the crockpot tonight. They had eaten a lot of crockpot meals as of late.

Gently closing the screen door behind her so that she wouldn't wake her mother, Annie started upstairs towards her bedroom, Ghost at her side.

Passing the first door on the right, Amy's room, Annie headed into her own and slid off her backpack, taking a moment to relax and breathe. The rest of the house may have been cold but her bedroom at least was comfortable.

With her daisy wallpaper and white furniture, there was just something... *relaxing* about the space.

Settling down on the floor by her bed, Annie reached under it and pulled out the shoebox full of notes between herself and her friends. Then, one by one, Annie began to place the notes from that year inside, pausing sometimes to read through them with a smile, her heart fluttering each time she read one from Bill.

She had not had a crush on him originally, back when they had first met. But after what happened two years ago, when he had gently

guided her out of the Barrens when she had hit her head on that rock, her heart fluttered every time she saw them.

He was a hero, he was *her* hero, and Bill Denbrough had suddenly become *Bill*. Not a single person in the whole world knew about her crush, except for Eddie, and he had promised not to tell.

Satisfied, Annie stood up again and changed into her new swimsuit, the one she had bought the weekend before with her allowance money. She had been delighted with it, loving the soft pink and white lines and the low back. It felt like the kind of swimsuit that a teenager would wear, unlike the one from the year before which had felt distinctly childish.

She had hoped to wear her new swimsuit to swim down at the quarry tomorrow, but at least she would get to spend her afternoon today swimming. With that happy thought in mind, Annie slipped on her sandals before heading out of the house, stopping momentarily to grab a towel. It occurred to her briefly that she could head next door to ask her friend Mike if he wanted to come and swim, but she didn't even know if he was home yet and besides that, he probably had chores to do. Some other time, she decided, and with that, she was out the backdoor, heading towards the backfield where the swimming hole was.

With a content sigh, Annie floated leisurely on her back, enjoying the feeling of the sun shining on her face. The swimming hole was nice, peaceful. Located within a small copse of trees, cattails lined the shoreline and, shortly after moving her father had tied a rope to a sturdy limb, making it possible to take a swinging leap into the water.

Ghost lounged on the shoreline, dozing in the afternoon sun but Annie knew, if he felt so inclined, he might end up bounding into the water to play.

She had gotten Ghost as a gift two Christmases ago and technically he was meant to have been both Annie *and* Amy's dog. Annie had been so sure that, like her parents, Ghost would prefer Amy. It had been hard to resent Amy for that, or maybe Annie felt like she wasn't

allowed to resent Amy but back then she couldn't stand the idea that Mama and Daddy *and* the damned dog might all just... prefer Amy. Poor, sick Amy who deserved *all* the sympathy and worry and love.

Ghost had quickly made his preference obvious, staying glued to Annie's side whenever she was home which had upset Amy but Annie had felt *victorious*. Amy could have their parents, but Ghost was Annie's.

Annie didn't like thinking about that, because it made something hard and spiteful settle into her chest. She had *loved* Amy, loved Amy even now that she was dead and gone and would give just about anything to have her little sister back, alive and well and no longer sick.

The only issue with that was that Annie was sure that her parents would do anything to have Amy back as well, even if the thing they had to give up was Annie herself.

That was a dangerous train of thought, but Annie had always suspected it in her heart of hearts. It was like this: if Annie and Amy were drowning, her parents would have saved them both, of course they would, but they would always, *always* have saved Amy first. So Annie had just had to learn to swim on her own.

These days, if Annie were drowning, she was not entirely convinced that her parents would even bother jumping in, was not convinced that they would even *notice*. Sometimes, Annie thought that neither of her parents could even swim on their own anymore.

A low growl reached her ears suddenly and, with a small frown, Annie opened her eyes to peer over at Ghost who was standing now, eyes set beyond Annie. His ears were flattened back and the fur along his shoulders was bristling, his lips curled back away from his teeth in a wicked snarl.

"Ghost?"

Annie straightened up, treading water now as she watched her dog, who had never acted this way as long as they had had him.

A chill ran up Annie's spine, as if the water had suddenly gotten ten degrees colder, and she turned slowly to peer over her shoulder, scanning the opposite bank, looking for any creature that could have Ghost acting this way. A squirrel maybe? Annie couldn't see anything though and she could think of nothing else that would have him acting like this.

The sight of the water rippling a few yards away had Annie tensing, brow furrowing. A fish? No, there were no fish in the swimming hole, otherwise, she wouldn't *swim* in it. A frog maybe?

A cold sense of fear clenched around Annie's heart and, as she watched, a gray fin slowly rose to the surface, cutting through the water and heading right towards Annie.

Christ! Annie thought. *It's that damn shark!*

She remembered, inexplicably, watching *Jaws* two weeks prior with the others. They had been at Richie's house and, despite how Annie had protested against it, she had been outvoted and she had had little choice but to settle back on the couch and to hide her face in Eddie's shoulder at all the scary parts. She had spent a good portion of that movie hiding her face. Annie *hated* sharks, had grown up in Louisiana hearing horror stories about them from classmates about how so-and-so knew somebody who had gotten an arm or a leg bitten off. Even worse had been the stories about people who had gotten *eaten by sharks*.

After she and her friends had watched the movie (which Richie had loved, of course) Annie had had nightmares for a week. She had told nobody except Eddie who, to his credit, had not laughed.

Distantly, some part of Annie's brain knew that she was being ridiculous, there was no way there was a *shark* in the goddamn pond and yet the proof was *there*, a gray dorsal fin headed towards her.

There was no denying the sudden sinister feeling in the air and suddenly Annie felt very small. Hunted. She was being *hunted*.

Ghost began to bark and that was all Annie needed to jerk herself out of her thoughts and to get *moving*.

She kicked powerfully, moving through the water with ease. Swimming was something Annie knew how to do, and she could do it *well*. But better than a *shark*? She supposed she didn't have to be a better swimmer really, she just had to move *faster*, fast enough to get out of the water before the shark's teeth closed around her leg.

Even now she could imagine how it might feel, like some sort of phantom pain.

What would her parents think if she died like this? Killed in the swimming hole by a *shark* of all things. The concept was ridiculous. This was not the ocean and there could be no shark. But clearly there *was* and as Annie swam she could feel the water shift around her. It was *right there*, right behind her, and her heart was *roaring* in her ears.

And then she reached the bank, hurrying out of the water and turning back in time to see the shark's jaws close around *nothing*, a second too late. She was close enough to see its *teeth*, close enough to count *every single wicked sharp one*.

With a pathetic whimper, Annie fell back onto her rear and began to cry. Even as she did, her mind told her that it *wasn't real*, that it couldn't be real.

But the evidence was *right there*. It had nearly gotten her, had been so close that she could see the evil gleam in its black, black eyes.

As she watched, the shark turned away, swimming out into the center of the water and beginning to go in circles.

Head back in the water, Annie, a voice in her head seemed to say. *Say hello. Take a dive. You'll never get out again but hey... at least you'll float! And who knows, maybe if you're lucky you'll get to see Amy. Don't you want to see Amy again?*

The thought scared her so badly that Annie scrambled to her feet, snatching her towel up from where it was neatly folded on the ground, before turning and *running*.

Ghost took off behind her, apparently not any more interested in

hanging around the water's edge than Annie was. And as she ran, Annie began to scream.

"MAMA! DADDY!"

As she approached the house, her father came around the side, confusion written across his face.

When he saw the tears streaming down her cheeks and the terror written on her face that confusion shifted to a look of concern and he hurried towards her, gripping her shoulders in his hands to hold her still.

"Annie?" He crouched down so that they were eye level and that was enough to bring Annie back to herself, to have her trying to take control of her heaving breaths.

She opened her mouth to say something, just as the sound of the back door swinging open had her looking up in surprise to find her mother standing there.

"What the hell is going on?" She snapped, placing her hands on her hips and looking stern. She didn't look nearly as concerned as her husband to find Annie in such a state.

"I-I... th-there..." Annie struggled to find her words, thinking for a moment that she sounded just like Bill.

"Annie!"

"There was a shark down in the water!" She rushed out, looking between the two of them desperately, imploring them to believe her.

Her father furrowed his brow in confusion but her mother scoffed, rolling her eyes.

"Is that right?" She asked sarcastically.

Annie blinked, mouth dropping open. "There was!" She insisted. "It tried to get me!"

"Annie, stop lying! It's not funny!"

Tears began to brim in the corner of Annie's eyes again at the sheer unfairness of it all, and she looked back at her father imploringly, hoping he would believe her, would believe that *something* really had happened. She could tell immediately that he didn't.

Annie took a step back, breaking her father's grip on her shoulders, gaze shifting between her mother and father. They didn't believe her. A sob choked up in Annie's throat and she reached out, brushing her fingers against Ghost's head. Her parents didn't believe her and, for the first time ever, they felt like complete strangers to her.

Annie sat in her bed that night, knees tucked beneath her chin, and a mug of hot cocoa gripped in her hands. She listened despondently as her parents argued downstairs. It had been a long time since they had cared enough to argue.

Before bed, her father had brought her the mug of hot chocolate and Annie had immediately recognized it for what it was, a peace offering. He knew she couldn't sleep without her customary mug of hot cocoa, but it had been a long time since he had bothered to remember.

She hated that they were arguing, hated the tumultuous rise of her mother's voice but there was also a sense of satisfaction curling up in her chest. They were arguing about *her*, and somehow them being exasperated or pissed off at her was better than indifference.

Still, it would have been better if they had just believed her.

"She's doing it for attention!" Her mother yelled, the sound echoing up the stairs.

"Then maybe we should pay her some attention!"

Annie winced, shaking her head. She would never, ever do something like that for attention. She wasn't that kind of person. Surely her parents had to know that.

They don't know what kind of person I am, anymore, she thought bitterly, bringing the mug up to her lips and taking a drink. Reaching

out, she began to scratch Ghost behind the ears, taking some comfort in his presence. At least he was on her side.

"She's being selfish! We're still grieving, Paul. She knows that!"

"We still have a living daughter, Shirl! And she still needs us!"

No, Annie thought, shaking her head stubbornly. *I don't need you. I don't need anyone.*

But even as she thought it, she knew it wasn't true. *I need Ghost*, she thought, feeling a rush of affection for the dog. *And I need Eddie.* But that was *it*, damnit! That was all. Just those two because they were the only ones she felt with absolute confidence would not let her down in the end.

Just Ghost and Eddie, she thought, finishing off her hot chocolate and placing the mug on her nightstand before settling back against her pillow. Ghost shifted closer, taking up most of the bed for himself now, and Annie smiled into the darkness.

Tomorrow she would spend all day with her friends, away from her parents and their doubts and disdain. Tomorrow would be better, she decided. And one thing was for certain, she would *not* be going back near the water.

The shark, don't think about the shark! She closed her eyes against the darkness, trying to determinedly think about anything else, but in the end, they drifted back to what had happened earlier that day.

You'll float, that voice had said and it had certainly sounded pleasant in her head, but there was something else, something nefarious. *I don't want to float*, Annie thought miserably. *Not ever.*

Author's Note: And that's chapter two posted! Not much to say here, other than to give a big thank you to everyone who has followed and favorited this story and an even bigger thank you to everyone who has reviewed. I really love hearing what you guys think!

4. The Barrens

The Barrens

Maybe it was silly, but Eddie prided himself on the fact that he knew Annabel Jackson better than anybody in the whole world. Better than her parents and Richie and Stan and even *Bill*. Eddie knew this because Annie had told him so herself on one particular afternoon when they had been down in the Barrens by themselves.

Eddie hadn't told her then, but Annie knew him best out of everyone too.

It was because he knew her so well that Eddie knew immediately when he set eyes on her that morning that something was wrong. Her usual happy grin of greeting was forced and there was something stormy lurking behind her blue eyes.

She parked her bike by the curb in front of his house, giving Richie and Bill a chance to say hello to Ghost, who had come loping up the street at her side. Eddie gave her a look, brow furrowed in confusion but Annie only shook her head mouthing '*later*'.

Then her gaze flickered briefly to Richie and Bill and Eddie knew she didn't want to say anything in front of them. She only wanted to talk about whatever was bothering her with *him*.

She hadn't complimented him exactly but it still felt like a form of praise and Eddie felt like he grew about three feet from it.

Annie had been uncharacteristically quiet all day, not even saying hello to Stan when he joined them, nor saying a single word on the trek down into the Barrens. Something had obviously happened, and Eddie couldn't help but wonder what it was.

Stan was the only one of the others who had seemed to notice and he kept shooting Annie quizzical looks, which she ignored, before looking at Eddie in confusion. Eddie could only shrug in response.

It wasn't like Annie to be like this. She was usually talkative and

optimistic but today it seemed as if a dark cloud had settled over her. Perhaps something had happened with her parents? Or, even worse, perhaps she had had a run-in with Henry Bowers on her ride to meet them this morning?

Either way, she kept her grip firm on Ghost's collar, keeping the dog from bounding into the brush to explore like he usually would. *This*, in particular, was strange, and the only thing Eddie could figure was that she wanted to keep her dog close, just in case.

Just in case of what?

They reached the water of the Kenduskeag and began to walk along its edge, following Bill as usual who seemed to have some idea where he was going.

"We're gonna c-ch-check the s-sewers," he told them matter-of-factly.

Eddie and Stan exchanged looks of dismay. The *sewers*? *No thanks, sorry Big Bill. We'll catch you tomorrow.*

Neither of them said that, of course, and neither of them would. Eddie thought, probably, that they would all be willing to follow Bill Denbrough into hell if he asked them.

Eddie couldn't even find it within himself to resent Bill for having earned Annie's affections in a way that Eddie himself had not. It wasn't as if Bill had asked for it, in fact, the boy remained oblivious. And *if* Bill ever did notice and decided it was something he wanted to pursue... well, Eddie wouldn't resent him then either because it would make Annie very happy and that's was the most important part.

Still, Eddie couldn't help but think about how things would be if Annie *did* like him. Maybe one day, Eddie would work up the courage to lean forward and press a kiss against the curve of her cheek and she would turn to look at him with surprise before offering him that secret smile of hers that she always seemed to reserve exclusively for him.

Things would never work out like that, of course. First of all, that

required a kind of bravery that Eddie simply didn't believe himself to be capable of. Secondly, he didn't think that Annie would *ever* look at him that way. Which was okay, because he was still her best friend and that was an honor that seemed nearly unparalleled. Still, it was nice to imagine.

"That's poison ivy," Stan announced as they approached a large drainage pipe. "That's poison ivy. And that's poison ivy."

Eddie looked around in alarm. "Where?" He asked. "Where's the poison ivy?"

All of the plants looked the same to him, and Eddie could just imagine the way his Ma would react if he showed up with a rash because he had accidentally stumbled into poison ivy.

Richie turned to look at them, shaking his head in exasperation, before following Bill into the pipe.

"It's not poison ivy," Annie assured Stan and Eddie. "It's virginia creeper."

Neither Stan nor Eddie looked entirely convinced, and just thinking about the plant was enough to have him scratching his arms.

"Not every fucking plant is poison ivy, Stanley," Richie called back, his voice echoing around in the pipe, offering it a distinctly creepy sound.

Eddie settled himself onto one of the rocks outside of the pipe, with Annie stepping up to join him, Ghost taking up the last remaining space on the rock, apparently not anymore interested in getting into the nasty smelling water than Annie or Eddie were.

"Okay well I'm starting to get itchy now and I'm pretty sure this is not good for me!" Eddie announced.

Bill didn't even glance back but Richie paused, turning to smirk at him. "Do you use the same bathroom as your mother?"

Eddie blinked, surprised by the question. "Sometimes, yeah."

"Then you probably have crabs," Richie told him with a shrug, ignoring the scowl Eddie sent him.

"That's so *not* funny!" Eddie snapped.

Richie laughed, apparently pleased with that reaction, before motioning the three of them to follow. "Aren't you guys coming?"

From beside him, Eddie heard Annie's snort of contempt, one that clearly said there was no way they were getting her to go into that sewer tunnel. Eddie was inclined to agree.

"Nu-uh," he shook his head, gesturing to the water at their feet. "That's gray water."

Richie furrowed his brow. "What the hell is gray water?"

Eddie sighed helplessly. "It's basically piss and shit," he explained. "So I'm just telling you... You guys are basically splashing around in millions of gallons of Derry pee."

Bill didn't look like he cared much but Richie gave him that usual shit-eating grin, reaching down to grab a long stick from the water and using it to catch a piece of cloth that had been floating at his feet. He leaned forward, giving it a cursory sniff, an action that had Eddie, Annie, and Stan gagging in disgust.

"Gross, Richie," Annie muttered.

"*Doesn't smell like caca to me señor*" Richie called, using one of his stupid voice impressions.

Eddie scoffed. "Okay, I can smell that from *here*."

"It's probably just your breath wafting back into your face!"

"Or maybe it's *you*, Richie!" Annie said suddenly, none of her usual good-natured teasing in her tone. "When was the last time you took a bath? Last year?"

Richie frowned, blinking owlishly at her, clearly not sure how to respond. For the first time ever, he seemed at a loss for words. And

he *still* hadn't put down that damn stick.

"Haven't you ever heard of a staph infection?" Eddie asked him impatiently.

"*Oh, I'll show you a staph infection!*" Richie moved the stick down, holding it between his legs before using it to vault the sopping wet piece of fabric at them. It was stopped from hitting Eddie in the face by tendrils of vines hanging down low around the mouth of the pipe. Still, it was enough to have Eddie yelping and stumbling back and it was only Annie's grip on his shoulder that kept him from toppling back into the water. He offered her a grateful smile before turning to glare at Richie again.

He was *always* doing this, it seemed, always trying to get under Eddie's skin and there were times when it drove him absolutely *bugshit!*

"*Guys!*" Bill called, trying to get their attention. They all looked up with a start to find him holding a shoe in his hand.

"Shit," Stan breathed. "Don't tell me that's... "

"No," Bill shook his head and they all breathed sighs of relief. "Georgie wore galoshes."

"Who's sneaker is it?" Eddie found himself asking.

Bill turned the show over, obviously reading the name written inside. "It's Betty Ripsom's."

A jolt went through Eddie and he shook his head. He didn't like this, didn't like this *at all*, and suddenly he felt very much like they shouldn't be down there, investigating around this nasty old pipe.

"*Oh shit!*" He cursed. "*Shit! Oh God! Oh fuck!* I don't like this!"

A quiet settled over the group, one that was finally broken by Richie. "How do you think Betty feels?" He asked. "Splashing around these tunnels with only one freaking shoe!"

A low growl from Ghost had Annie tensing, turning to face the dog

who had set his gaze into the tunnel. His head was lowered and the fur around his shoulders was bristling dangerously. Eddie shot Annie a confused look. He had never heard Ghost growl like that before.

Annie gaped at the dog before turning to look into the tunnel, blue eyes wide as saucers.

She's scared, Eddie realized. He had never seen Annie look like this before. He'd seen her scared before when faced with Henry and his friends, but that was nothing compared to this.

Reaching out she gripped Eddie's hand in her own and tugged on it insistently. "I want to go," she told him. "I want to go *right now*."

A chill ran up Eddie's spine. *Something was wrong*.

Stan had turned to look at the two of them, his brow furrowed, and Eddie could tell from the expression on his face that he was about two seconds away from agreeing to leave as well.

"Yeah," Eddie told her consolingly. "Yeah, okay. We'll go."

Ghost was still growling, eyes set on the darkness of the tunnel looking ready to attack. It was kind of scary. Was that what had Annie spooked?

Eddie had just turned so that they could move away from the mouth of the pipe when Bill spoke up again, making them freeze.

"If I were Betty Ripsom," he began solemnly. "I would want us to find her. Georgie too... "

Annie's grip on Eddie's hand tightened and she released a shuddery breath, sounding suddenly like she might begin crying.

"Billy, please..."

She sounded dangerously close to agreeing to stay, to agreeing to head into that tunnel, and Eddie knew that if Bill asked her too she would, just as surely as he knew he had never seen her so terrified.

"What if I don't want to find them?" Eddie asked suddenly, drawing

their attention back to him. If he had to be the bad guy that was just fine with him. Anything to get them out of there. "I mean no offense Bill, but I don't want to end up like... " he paused, thinking better of his words. "I don't want to end up missing either."

Bill stared at Eddie hard, frowning, and Eddie felt himself shrink back under that look. Still, he held his ground.

"He has a point," Stan said, drawing Bill's attention to him.

"You too?" Bill asked, sounding disappointed.

Stan sighed heavily. "It's summer!" He pointed out. "We're supposed to be having fun! This is scary and *disgusting!*"

As if in agreement, Ghost gave another loud, booming bark.

Annie tugged on Eddie's hand again, urging him to leave, before shooting Richie and Bill an apologetic look. "I have a bad feeling guys," she said. "We shouldn't be down here."

Bill opened his mouth to reply, but before he could, the sound of splashing water had Eddie, Annie, and Stan whipping around, Annie letting out a cry of surprise.

A boy about their age had come stumbling down the Kenduskeag and had fallen to his knees right there behind them. He looked about like he had been put through a blender, if Eddie were being honest, with blood and dirt and sweat staining his clothes and skin.

"Holy shit, what happened to you?" Richie asked as he and Bill exited the tunnel.

The kid, who's name Eddie thought was Ben, seemed to shrink under all of their gazes, looking from each of them with wide eyes.

Annie looked him over, frowning, before releasing Eddie's hand and hopping over to the stone nearest Ben, crouching down next to him.

Eddie didn't like Annie getting so close to this kid, not when he was bleeding like that. What if he had some kind of sickness? What if he gave it to Annie? Still, she didn't make any move to touch him and

Ben did not move closer.

"You're hurt, huh?" She asked gently. "You want us to help you back to town?"

He looked up at her, seeming to relax at the small smile she gave him, before nodding gratefully. "Please."

She stood up, turning to face the others. "We have to go," she told them, sounding relieved.

She had an excuse now, no more arguments. Without looking back at the others, Eddie hooked his fingers around Ghost's collar and followed after Annie as she started back the way they had come

With Ben sitting precariously on the back of Silver, the group had made their way carefully into town, and the further away the got, the more Annie's racing heart had calmed.

Her sleep the night before had been burdened with nightmares and when she had woken that morning her pillow had been damp, either with tears or sweat, Annie wasn't sure. Either way, she had been enormously grateful to find Ghost still laying dutifully in her bed like some kind of guard. If he hadn't been with her the day before, Annie had no doubt in her mind that the shark would have gripped her between its teeth and pulled her under. He had *saved* her and that was what had led Annie to bring him with her today. The part of her that was still piss-your-pants-scared was more comfortable with Ghost at her side.

Besides, *he* didn't look at her like she was crazy for seeing a shark in the water. *He* had clearly seen the exact same thing she had.

She knew that Eddie had realized that something was wrong but was unsure what to tell him and, if she were being honest, she didn't think she would be able to stand it if *he* looked at her like she was insane. Out of everybody, she needed Eddie to believe her most.

When Ghost had started growling at that tunnel again today, it was like ice water had trickled down her spine and terror had gripped her

heart, just like it had the day before. Was something there in the sawyers? Just out of sight but watching them? Another shark? That didn't make a lick of sense but it didn't make any sense for Annie to have seen one the day before either.

So then the only thing she could figure was that it had been something *else*. Some monster in disguise, but that way of thinking seemed childish and made even less sense than seeing a shark.

Don't think about it, Annie thought determinedly, but that had done her no good the night before so what made her think it would do any good now.

You've gone insane is what. Seeing sharks and thinking every time your dog barks that means there's a monster around. Sounds insane to me. If you're not careful your parents with cart you off to Juniper Hill.

"I think it's great that we're helping the new kid but we also need to think about our own safety," Eddie was saying, likely trying to appeal to any of their good senses. "I mean there's an AIDS epidemic happening right now, as we speak. I mean my mom's friend in New York City got it just by touching a dirty pole in a subway and she got AIDS blood into her system through a hangnail, a *hangnail*. And they can amputate legs and arms. But how do you amputate a *waist*?"

Annie couldn't help but look at her friend in exasperated affection. Of all the things to be worried about. From up ahead, Ben kept shooting uneasy glances back at Eddie and, in retrospect, Eddie likely wasn't helping to ease his mind.

They turned to head into an alley, down the street from the Pharmacy, where they could park their bikes and get a better look at Ben's stomach wound.

"You know there are alleys full of AIDS-infected needles, right?" Eddie asked immediately, sounding concerned. "You know that, right?"

"Eddie, it'll be fine," Annie assured him, parking her bike and hopping off.

He looked at her for a moment, not seeming entirely convinced, but leaned his bike up against the wall as well.

Clearly too tired to stand, Ben leaned up against the brick wall before sliding into a sitting position. Ghost immediately headed over and began to sniff him curiously. Tentatively, Ben offered his hand for Ghost to smell before beginning to pet the dog.

"Richie, wait here," Bill instructed, already hurrying down the alleyway. "Come on!"

The others fell in behind, with Annie hesitating for a moment. "Watch Ghost, okay?" And with that she rushed after them, falling into step beside Eddie again as they entered the pharmacy, heading to the medical aisle.

Bill and Stan began to check their pockets for money, pulling out a measly few dollars while Annie and Eddie began to inspect the various items for sale. Eddie began to grab stuff at random, piling it up in his arms, while Annie was more careful, grabbing a bottle of antiseptic and some gauze tape. After a moment of consideration, she grabbed a bottle of pain killers as well, showing it to Eddie who nodded in approval.

When the two of them turned to face their friends, Stan held up the few dollars sheepishly.

"Can we afford all that?" Bill asked, looking at the small mountain of medical products in Eddie's arms. "This is all we've got."

"Are you kidding?"

Eddie looked between the money and the supplies with no small amount of frustration, obviously finding all of it necessary to treat Ben's wounds. Annie wasn't so sure about that, but Eddie knew more about medical stuff than she did, so who was she to question him?

"Wait," Bill looked at Eddie as if he had had a *eureka* moment. "You have an account here, don't you?"

Eddie scoffed. "If my mom finds out I bought all this stuff, I'll spend the whole rest of the week in the emergency room!"

Annie bit her lip, turning to look over her shoulder at Mister Keane who was behind the pharmacy counter, not paying them much mind. "Maybe we should just tell him the truth and he'll let us *have* the stuff."

She turned back to find all three boys looking at her with expressions of doubt.

"*What?*" She defended. "He *might*."

"Or he might tell us to get the hell out of here," Eddie told her.

That was probably the more likely of the two, honestly. Mister Keane was not exactly known for his generosity.

Annie opened her mouth to say something else, but before she could, somebody came around the corner of the aisle, catching all four of them by surprise. They froze, looking up at the girl with identical expressions of shock.

Beverly Marsh, Annie realized. She had never spoken much to the girl but she had a pretty bad reputation and a large portion of the graffiti in the school restrooms was dedicated to who Bev Marsh had allegedly blown or slept with. Annie had learned long ago to take those rumors with a grain of salt and didn't set much stock in what girls like Greta or Sally said.

Still, Bev had always seemed fiercely independent, like she didn't give a damn what anybody thought about her, and Annie guessed she had always been too intimidated to try and make friends with her.

She was hiding something behind her back, Annie blinked, tilting her head to try to see what it was but Bev shifted, obscuring her sight further.

"You okay?" Bill asked.

"I'm fine," Bev said quickly. "What's wrong with you?"

"None of your business," Stan told her, obviously trying to maintain secrecy.

"New kid outside, looks like someone killed him," Eddie told her, obviously not *caring* about secrecy.

"We need some s-s-s-supplies but-

"But we don't have enough money," Annie finished, peeking back at Mister Keane again, trying to figure out a solution. They could start stuffing things into their pockets and under the fronts of their shirts, she supposed, but they would look rather obvious and if he caught them, Mister Keane would definitely call their parents. After the argument her parents had had the night before, that was about the last thing she needed. Her mom would probably accuse her of shoplifting for attention next.

So then what were they going to do? Ben was outside hurt and waiting for them to bring the damn supplies they had promised and-

"I'll help," Beverly said, looking past them at the counter. "When I tell you to go, then hurry up and go." And with that, she was walking past them.

"What's she going to do?" Stan asked, sounding concerned, but Bill was watching her walk away with a kind of dazed expression on his face.

Oh. *Oh*. So that's how it was.

Annie couldn't really blame Bill either. Beverly was remarkably lovely, with her fiery red hair and pretty smile. She supposed all of the guys probably had a thing for her.

Beverly reached the counter and said something to Mister Keane, who smiled back at her. A moment later, he offered Bev his glasses.

Annie blinked. "She's gonna make him blind so that we can leave without him seeing us?"

Eddie tightened his grip on the items in his arms but apparently blinding Mister Keane was *not* Bev's plan, as she did not give them any sign that they should leave.

Bev handed the glasses back over to Mister Keane, taking care to

knock a display back over the counter when she did so. Mister Keane sighed before ducking down to pick it back up. Bev turned to glance over her shoulder at the four of them, nodding towards the door, and that was enough to have them turning to hurry out the door and back down the street where Ben and Richie were waiting for them.

Bev had seemed so confident, strolling up to Mister Keane the way she had. Annie doubted that she would ever be able to do something like that. And the way Bill had watched her... entranced. It made Annie feel a bit silly but she wanted Bill to look at *her* like that.

Of all the times to be thinking about that though, *now* certainly wasn't it. After everything that had happened the day before and with Ben hurt, what kind of silly-minded girl did she have to be to worry about something like that?

They reached the alleyway and Eddie immediately set to work, crouching down beside Ben and lifting his shirt to reveal the 'H' that Henry Bowers had carved into his stomach. She felt a surge of sympathy for the boy and opened the pain killers to pull out two, handing them over.

"Here," she said. "No water though for you to take them with. Sorry."

He took them, looking grateful, before popping them into his mouth and swallowing. "Thanks," he said.

"Figured it probably hurt a whole bunch," she said with a shrug. "What did you do to make him mad?"

"Didn't let him copy off of my final exam in math," Ben told her.

Eddie let out a low whistle. "You must have a death sentence, kid."

It wasn't exactly a secret that Henry had been held back in his math class more than once. If he was *this* mad at Ben, he had clearly failed again.

While they had been in the store, Ghost had settled down beside Ben and laid there even now, watching the whole affair transpire with indifference.

Setting his supplies on the ground, Eddie looked up at Annie. "Can you do me a favor and grab my bifocals? They're in my second fanny pack."

She nodded, already moving away, feeling rather proud that Eddie trusted *her* to get something out of one of his fanny packs? He kept all of his important medicines in there and it was with no small amount of trust that he would ask her to look inside.

"Dude, why do you have two fanny packs?" She heard Richie ask as she grabbed the pouch from the basket on Eddie's bike and opened it, grabbing the glasses immediately and returning to his side.

Eddie sighed and shook his head, accepting the glasses. "I need to focus right now," he told him. "It's a long story."

Annie crouched down beside Eddie and Ben, holding whatever Eddie needed up to him dutifully. From the end of the alley, she heard Bill speak and glanced over her shoulder to see that Beverly had shown up again and was offering Bill an amicable smile. Then she glanced down the alley and saw Ben and her eyes widened.

"Ben from Soc?' She started towards them, but the others were too occupied with trying to help to notice. Except for Ben, who self-consciously tried to tug down his t-shirt to cover up his stomach but Eddie wouldn't let him.

"You have to suck the wound before you apply the bandage," Richie told Eddie insistently, ignoring the disgusted look the other boy gave him in return.

"You don't know what you're talking about," Eddie said impatiently.

"Are you okay?" Bev asked when she reached them. She sounded concerned. "That looks like it hurts."

"No, I'm good," Ben shook his head. "I just fell."

Annie snorted. In what world did Ben think it looked like he had *just* fell?

"Yeah," Richie scoffed derisively. "Right into Henry Bowers."

Ben raised his head slowly to fix Richie with a disdainful look.

"Shut it, R-r-Richie," Bill snapped.

"Why? It's the truth!"

Annie and Eddie exchanged equal looks of exasperation, Annie slowly shaking her head. Richie could be oblivious even at the best of times. It wasn't that he was stupid, Annie knew he consistently got good grades, he just often didn't pay attention.

"You sure they got the right stuff to fix you up?" Bev asked, offering Ben a secret little wink that, Annie suspected, went mostly unnoticed.

Ben certainly noticed though, and quickly averted his gaze, his cheeks darkening with a blush.

"You know w-w-w-w-we'll take care of him," Bill told her, his own cheeks looking flush. His stutter always got worse when he was nervous, Annie noted, like when he was faced with a pretty girl who he had feelings for. "Thanks again, Beverly."

"Sure," Bev nodded, offering him a small smile before she began to turn away to leave. "Maybe I'll see you around."

"Yeah," Bill nodded eagerly. "We were maybe thinking about going to the q-q-quarry tomorrow if you wanna... "

Annie and Stan exchanged looks of confusion. They were? This was news to both of them.

"Come?" Bev asked, her smile widening. "Good to know. Thanks." And with that she was gone, headed back down the way she had come, leaving Bill to watch her leave, still with that kind of dazed expression on his face.

As soon as she was gone, Stan turned to fix Richie with a stern glare. "Nice going, bringing up Bowers in front of her!"

"Yeah," Eddie agreed. "Did you hear what she did?"

"What'd she do?" Ben asked, looking between them curiously.

"Nothing," Annie assured him before glaring at each of the boys in turn. "Just because Greta Bowie spread some nasty rumors about her doesn't mean they're true."

"It wasn't just Greta," Richie insisted. "I heard some guys talking about it in the locker room, and from what I've heard it's more like who she'd do. I heard that the list is longer than my wang."

Annie wrinkled her nose and shook her head, disgusted with the direction the conversation had turned.

"That's not saying much," Stan scoffed.

"They're j-j-just rumors," Bill told Ben firmly.

Richie rolled his eyes. "Anyway, Bill had her back in third grade. They kissed in the school play. The reviews said that you can't fake that kind of passion." Seemingly bored with that conversation he turned back to Eddie who was carefully cleaning the wound now. *"Now, pip pip and tally-ho my good fellows, I do believe this chap requires our utmost attention. Now get in there Dr. K and fix him up!"*

Eddie didn't even spare him a glance. "Why don't you shut the fuck up, Einstein, because I know what I'm doing and I don't want you doing the British guy!"

"Suck the wound. Get in there!"

Besides the Barrens, Annie's second favorite spot in Derry was the trainyard where she and Eddie would often wander on their own when the others had all wandered off to head home or do their own thing. They had no real reason really, other than they liked the quiet and liked to watch the occasional trains pass by.

Today, when Stan and Bill had headed off to see Ben home and Richie had gone home to mow the grass, Annie and Eddie had turned their bikes in the direction of the trainyard wordlessly and as they drew closer Annie dreaded more and more the question that she knew was coming.

What's wrong, Annie?

They pushed their bikes now, leaning them against the chain-link fence that lined the perimeter of the yard before walking inside, Ghost walking between them. They had ridden over in amicable silence but now that they were here, Annie didn't expect that to last long.

Eddie would ask her what was wrong and Annie would tell him and then one of two things would happen. Eddie would either believe her, or he would think she was crazy.

Once upon a time, a person could catch a passenger train at what was then the Neibolt Street Station, but those had stopped coming through Derry a long time ago, around the time that the Korean War had started up. These days, the only trains that came through Derry where long freighters carrying things like pulpwood or paper or potatoes or even manufactured goods like cars or trucks.

Eddie and Annie especially liked to go to the trainyard on Saturdays, when the most trains would come through.

For the most part, they were free to come and go as they liked and would only be sent away if Mister Braddock, the former trainmaster, found them. These days, no trains stopped in Derry and Annie imagined old Mister Braddock didn't have much to do.

Today, the trainyard seemed mostly empty. There hadn't been a full-time security officer since the early fifties and these days the only real form of security was some guy who drove by in his old Ford a couple of times a night.

Eddie and Annie both kept quiet as they heaved themselves up into an old, empty train car, sitting in the entrance and dangling their legs outside. Annie kicked her feet absently.

"Something's bothering you," Eddie said finally. Not a question, a statement. He didn't look at her but kept his gaze set on Ghost who was a few yards away, sniffing curiously at an old, empty crate.

"Yes," Annie responded but didn't elaborate.

"Did something happen with your parents?"

"No," Annie told him, before hesitating. "Well, actually yes, but that's not what's bothering me."

"So what is it?"

She bit her lip, looking at him unsurely. What if she told him and he laughed in her face?

Don't be stupid! Eddie wouldn't do that!

No, he probably wouldn't. But she also had not expected her mother to accuse her of lying to get attention so...

"I... saw something," Annie said finally, turning to look at him. "Yesterday afternoon."

Eddie looked up at her in alarm. "What? Something bad?"

She nodded gravely. "Yeah," she told him miserably. "Real bad. Only... when I told my parents what I saw, they didn't believe me. My mom accused *me of lying* to get attention. So... if I tell you, you have to promise to believe me."

She sounded pathetic, Annie thought, *practically begging Eddie to believe her.*

He looked surprised at how solemn she sounded but nodded. "Of course I will," he said.

"I saw... " she began, before shaking her head. "Look I know how this is going to sound, Eddie. I *know* it sounds crazy, but I was swimming yesterday and I got attacked by a *shark!*"

Eddie blinked, looking at her hard for a long moment as if expecting her to laugh. *Ha! Just kidding Eddie! Had you going there for a sec though, didn't I?* When that didn't happen he swallowed, brow furrowed in confusion.

"A shark?" He asked.

Annie groaned miserably, hiding her face in her hands. "You don't believe me!"

"What?" Eddie sounded panicked. "No! Of course, I believe you, Annie! I believe you think you saw the shark!" He reached out to place a comforting hand on her shoulder.

Annie raised her head to look at him again, frowning. "You think I imagined it?" She asked.

Eddie was frowning too, looking unsure what to say, like he was afraid that anything that came out of his mouth could be the wrong thing. "Well... I mean... it couldn't have been a *real* shark," he told her finally.

"Look," Annie sighed. "I know it *couldn't* have been. But it was. And Ghost saw it too and was barking at it just like he was barking today in the Barrens. That's why I was so scared and wanted to leave so badly. I thought... I thought something else bad was going to happen. And... if Bill had asked me to go into that tunnel I would have, even though I was so scared. Eddie, I've never been so scared in my life as I was yesterday but today, in the Barrens... it came pretty close... "

Eddie reached out slowly, grabbing Annie's hand and holding it tight. "So if he asks you tell him no, Annie," he told her, sounding suddenly fierce. "If you're scared, you tell him no."

Easier said than done, Annie thought. She didn't think that Eddie would be any more capable of telling Bill no that she would if he seriously asked. As if he could sense the thoughts going through her mind, he squeezed her hand again.

"I'm serious."

"Sure," she nodded slowly. "Sure, I'll tell him that." She didn't sound entirely convinced, and Eddie didn't look like he believed her at all.

After a moment, Annie took a deep breath and decided to press the original issue again. "What about the shark?"

"Well," Eddie began thoughtfully. "It was in the swimming hole, right? So just don't go back in until the rest of us are over and can check for a shark ourselves."

Well, that... seemed perfectly logical... Why hadn't Annie thought of

that? She wouldn't even need to tell the others what had happened because *if* there was something in the water then they would notice immediately, right? And she would be fine to swim in the quarry because there was no way it could have gotten from one body of water to the other.

Suddenly, Annie felt glad that she had confided in Eddie. He always had a way of making her feel better about things.

"Okay," she said. "Yeah, that sounds good."

Offering her a smile, Eddie squeezed her hand gently and she squeezed his back, feeling suddenly in a better mood than she had all day.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: Just wanted to say a quick thanks to everyone who has followed or reviewed this story! I really appreciate it and always look forward to what you guys have to say regarding my chapters!

5. Leap Of Faith

Leap Of Faith

Eddie's words of wisdom had worked wonders for Annie most of the night before, she had been in a perfectly pleasant mood when she had gotten home and okay, yes she had had nightmares, but that was not terribly uncommon. Kids had nightmares all the time, *nothing strange*.

But that morning, when she had sat down to breakfast with her father, he had turned on the news on the little television they had sitting on the edge of the kitchen counter. Annie had not really been paying attention, too busy trying to sneak Ghost pieces of sausage.

"Local teen, Patrick Hoffstetter has been reported missing this morning by his parents," The reporter said, drawing Annie's attention upward. She gaped at the tv. Hadn't Ben said that Patrick had been with Henry the day before?

"Another kid missing," her father, mused, shaking his head and sipping his coffee. "Damn shame. Did you know him, Annie?"

"Yes," Annie told him, not making eye contact. "He was friends with Henry Bowers."

Was. As if he was already gone, already dead.

For a moment Annie was compelled to tell her father that it had been Patrick who had shoved her down in the Barrens two years ago, that she hadn't fallen at all. But that would do no good now and anyway, she might actually get into trouble for lying in the first place.

Still, without thinking about it her hand drifted up so she could brush her fingers against her hairline, where that damned scar was. Patrick had always been *particularly* scary. Scarier than Henry Bowers even and Henry himself was batshit crazy.

Annie could remember the first time she had met Patrick. She had been heading to meet her friends in the Barrens during that first

summer and Patrick had called out to her from the street corner. Ignoring him would have seemed the height of rudeness and so Annie had warily walked over to see whatever Patrick had been holding in his hands. As it turned out, it was a pencil case full of dead flies.

Annie's stomach had turned, especially when she looked up at Patrick to see that smile he was giving her. *His eyes had been dark, very dark. Shark eyes. Dead eyes. He looked like something out of a horror movie,* Annie had thought then, before making her excuses and hurrying away.

When she had told the others what had happened a few minutes later she had been advised to stay away from Patrick and Annie had taken that to heart. Fine, no problem. You wouldn't catch her arguing.

Now, as she sat there watching a news report about the boy, something cold clenched her heart. *Good riddance,* she thought, instantly feeling guilty.

Hurriedly she finished her breakfast before taking the plate over to the sink to wash it and beginning to hurry out of the kitchen, intent on getting her things and hurrying to meet the others at the quarry.

"Annie?"

She hesitated in the doorway, turning back to look at her father who was watching her with a furrowed brow.

"You okay, kiddo?" He asked.

Annie blinked, staring at her father for a long moment before forcing a smile. "Yes sir," she told him. "I gotta hurry up and go meet the others. We're going swimming today."

Her dad looked troubled by something but finally gave her a simple nod. "Be careful today, okay?"

"Okay," and with that she was gone, collecting her things into a backpack before stopping briefly in the kitchen again to gather up some snacks to eat later for lunch. By then, her father had already finished up his breakfast and had headed outside to start his work for the day.

Without bothering to say goodbye to her mother, who was still asleep, Annie hopped on her bike and took off, trying hard not to think about missing Patrick Hockstetter and the feeling she had gotten down in the Barrens the day prior, and trying even harder not to think about the shark.

The bike ride to the barrens was a familiar one and as Annie rode up the hill leading to the highest vantage point which would provide the *coolest* dive into the water below, she gave a squeeze to her bike's ooghah horn, alerting them to her presence.

"Hey!" She called, dismounting. They were all set to swim, having stripped down to only their underwear. The first time they had gone swimming down here, Annie had blushed and spent the whole time stammering, never having seen a boy in his underpants before, but these days she was just used to it.

"You're late," Richie told her. She shrugged in response.

"I was having breakfast with my dad," Annie said. It was true, of course, but it wasn't the *truth*. She had been watching that damned news broadcast. Probably, she should tell the others but now was not the time. "What are you guys doing just standing up here?"

"Waiting for you," Eddie told her at the same time Ben said, "Playing loogie."

Annie wrinkled her nose. "It's a shame I missed that."

"Alright, come on," Richie turned, nudging Eddie to draw his attention again. "Who's going first?"

None of them looked too eager at the idea, being the first to jump was always scary, but a new voice called, quite suddenly, "I'll go!"

They all turned in surprise to see the Beverly had arrived and allowed her bike to fall to the ground while she unbuttoned her dress, stripping down to her underwear. The others gaped at her even as Bev gave them an easy smile and rushed past them, calling out a good-natured "*Sissies!*" before leaping over the edge and plunging down into the water far below.

"*What the fuck?*" She heard Richie yell, pretty accurately summarizing what Annie was sure they were all feeling.

Not one to be outdone, Richie and Bill were quick to follow, leaving the others to stand around and decide who was next.

Bev's hair was shorter, Annie noted idly, blinking, trying to process what had just happened and the amount of self-confidence it must have taken for her to be able to do that. She had just... thrown her clothes off. Like it was nothing.

But that's what the boys had done too. Annie looked up at them with a furrowed brow. Well if *they* could do it, and *Bev* could do it, then why couldn't Annie?

With that firm resolve, she reached up and began to pull her own dress over her head.

"*What are you doing?*"

Annie blinked, looking up to see that Eddie had turned to face her, his eyes stretched almost comically wide. If she wasn't so nervous to be just taking her clothes off, it would even be funny.

Stan and Ben turned to face her too and Stan immediately flushed, looking away quickly while Ben seemed to decide that jumping into the water seemed very inviting and leaped in as well.

"I'm about to go swimming," Annie told Eddie as if it were the most obvious thing in the world.

"Yeah but..." He didn't seem to have a good reply to that and was very pointedly not meeting her gaze. *And* his face was very, very red.

Sure, Annie thought. *I'm his best friend. He probably thinks it's weird that I'm doing it.*

But as Annie allowed her pretty gingham dress to flutter to the ground, it felt more like she was proving a point.

Now, only in her pink cotton underwear, Annie walked forward to peer down into the water below where their friends were waiting. It

was a clear, blue day and the sun was sweltering. It was the perfect day for swimming.

But, as Annie peered down at the water she felt her stomach flop unpleasantly. She was thinking of all those teeth and those awful black eyes. Like Patrick Hockstetter's eyes, dark and empty. Evil eyes.

"Annie?"

It was Stan who spoke up, making her look up at him in surprise. Usually, Annie would go jumping in, eager to splash in the water below. She never hesitated.

"I forgot sunscreen," She said simply, giving him a small smile. "You have some, right Eddie?"

"Of course," Eddie replied immediately, sounding surprised. Annie knew he would have some, of course. His mom never let him leave the house without it, even on cloudy days.

"You go ahead Stan," Annie told him. "We'll be just a minute."

Left with no other excuses, Stan nodded and looked reluctantly down at the water before jumping in.

For a moment, Annie stood and examined their friends swimming down below. Everything seemed perfectly fine, there was nothing amiss. No sharks coming from nowhere to pull them down into the depths.

"Annie?"

She turned to find Eddie offering his bottle of sunblock to her and she took it gratefully.

"You don't usually worry about sunblock," he pointed out, watching as she squeezed a portion into her hand and began to rub it into her arms and shoulders.

"No," she agreed. "I'm just... "

"Thinking about what happened?" He was looking at her critically,

brown eyes narrowed.

"You always know what's going on in my head," Annie sighed, smearing some sunblock across her face now.

Eddie looked rather proud of himself. "That's because I'm your best friend," he told her, accepting the bottle of sunblock when she handed it back and putting it into his fanny pack.

Silence fell between them as he zipped the bag back up and placed it on top of his pile of clothes. "I don't like you being scared," he said finally, not looking at her. "I'm supposed to be the scaredy-cat."

"You're not a scaredy-cat!" Annie told him fiercely. "I'm the one over here afraid of imaginary *maybe* sharks."

He looked up at her again, expression softening. "Want to jump down together?" He asked.

That, Annie realized, *was exactly what she wanted*. And so, with a grateful smile, she took his outstretched hand in hers and together they stepped up to the edge and jumped.

Annie had freckles all down her shoulders and arms and back. Eddie supposed he had noticed before, he had seen her in swimsuits and tank tops before, but he had never *really* noticed the way they were scattered like cinnamon over tanned skin.

The only problem now was that he was fairly certain the other guys were noticing too.

When she had first taken her dress off, doing the exact same thing that Beverly had done only a moment prior, Eddie was *pretty sure* he had died. Now? Well, he thought maybe he was in heaven with the way she was sitting with her back to them, dangling her feet in the water. Her hair was mostly dry now and the sun cast it in brilliant gold.

She didn't seem to notice that the others were looking between her and Bev, who was stretched out sunbathing. She kept her gaze cast out over the water, toes just barely brushing the surface, and Eddie

couldn't help but wonder if she was thinking about the shark again.

The song on the boombox that Richie had brought down changed, *Bust a Move* now blaring through the speakers and Eddie couldn't help but roll his eyes.

Seriously? Of all the songs?

Annie glanced back over her shoulder, looking thoroughly unimpressed at the song. She seemed to notice the way the other boys were staring at Bev and caught Eddie's eye, lips quirking up in amusement. He grinned back in response and Annie stood suddenly, moving to take a seat next to him on his rock.

She reached forward to grab her backpack, retrieving a Moon Pie from inside. She opened it up and broke it in half before offering Eddie a piece, which he gratefully accepted.

"News flash, Ben, school's out for summa!"

Annie furrowed her brow, looking past Eddie who turned to see that Richie was rifling through Ben's bag carelessly and had seemingly come across a stack of books and papers. Annie rolled her eyes. It wouldn't have been anything for Richie to have done that to one of them, but Ben didn't know him very well yet, and still looked quite unsure of what to do.

"Oh, that's not school stuff," Ben said finally.

Eddie blinked. He didn't know a whole lot of kids who carried around big books like that just for the fun of it. Even *he* didn't, and Eddie liked reading better than most other kids his age.

He supposed *maybe* Annie would, she had huge stacks of books in her bedroom, most of them old that she had bought used for very cheap, but *not* big, leather-bound books like the ones Ben seemed to have.

He certainly was a strange kid, carefully polite and quiet, but he was friendly enough and had gone through school since he had moved to Derry with no friends. Eddie figured he was probably pretty happy to be included in the group.

Bev too hadn't seemed to have many friends, Eddie supposed maybe because she was from the lower-income part of Derry or because of the rumors he had heard about her. Girls avoided her, sneering at her in the hallways, and boys often sought her out only for Bev to tell them that they could fuck right off.

She had never seemed to care much about the rumors spread about her but maybe that was a mask and maybe she too was thankful to be suddenly part of a group of friends.

Or maybe, Eddie thought, she was just happy to get to hang out with Bill. He had seen the way they had been peeking glances at each other all day and despite what some of the other kids at school seemed to think, Eddie wasn't stupid. He knew the kinds of looks they were exchanging because he reserved looks like that for one girl in particular.

"Who sent you this!" Richie asked suddenly, holding up what looked like a postcard. Before he could read it, however, Ben snatched it away.

"No one!" He said quickly.

Richie didn't seem at all perturbed and quickly turned his attention back to the contents of the backpack, pulling out still more papers. "What's with the history project?" He asked, cocking a brow.

"Oh," Ben seemed almost embarrassed, blushing slightly. "Well when I first moved here I really didn't have anyone to hang out with so I just started spending time in the library."

"You went to the library?" Richie asked, sounding surprised. "On purpose."

From beside Eddie, Annie gave a little snort of laughter. "Well, Richie, some people actually *know* how to read."

Richie turned to offer Annie a light-hearted glare and stuck his middle finger up playfully at her to which Annie only smiled in response, batting her lashes innocently.

"I wanna see," Bev said suddenly, standing and taking her sunglasses

off. She moved to sit next to Bill and reached over so that Richie could pass some of the papers over.

Annie watched her for a moment, clearly taking in the almost sheepish look Bill offered her. With anyone else, Eddie might have expected a look of jealousy to pass over their face but Annie only smiled softly. When she realized Eddie was watching, Annie's smile widened.

She was, Eddie decided, too nice for her own good. But that wasn't exactly a recent development. She had always been sweet and kind and not just where Eddie was concerned. He had seen it the day before, hadn't he? When she had crouched down next to Ben and had spoken to him so gently, knowing that he had been scared and in pain.

She only ever teased lightly and that was never out of spite or meanness. Annie always seemed so thoughtful about what the others might be thinking or feeling and she always tried to be considerate of those feelings.

Richie said it was because Annie was a girl and girls were just more sensitive than boys. Eddie wasn't sure if that was quite right and thought maybe it had more to do with Annie's temperament. *She was just a nice person* he had told Richie who had knowingly rolled his eyes.

So instead of hating Beverly for getting Bill's attention in the way that *she* wanted his attention, she had only smiled and accepted her.

Eddie felt a sudden rush of affection for her, thinking suddenly that she was *too* good, *too* soft, *too* kind and that being those things was perfectly okay.

"What's the Black Spot?" Stan asked.

Annie perked up like she was sitting in English class again and had been asked a question.

"It was a nightclub that was burnt down in like... the fifties by this racist cult."

The others all turned to look at her in surprise and Annie blinked before shrugging one delicate shoulder. "Mike Hanlon told me," she explained. "His dad told him. His dad worked at it with some other company men when they were in the military. Mike said that it was burned down by that racist cult."

And on that thoroughly depressing note, the group continued to look through the research in Ben's bag.

"Y-y-y-your hair... " Bill was looking at Beverly with *that* look on his face again, a flush on his cheeks.

She looked slightly concerned, reaching up to touch the now much shorter strands self-consciously.

"Your hair looks beautiful, Beverly," Ben interjected before Bill could stutter through a compliment.

"You should talk to Mr. Hanlon," Annie said suddenly, drawing everyone's attention to her again. "He knows a lot about Derry. You could probably learn a lot from him."

Eddie himself didn't know much about Mike Hanlon or his family. He had met him, of course, usually with Annie orchestrating the whole thing. They were neighbors and Eddie knew their dads were friends. Annie and Mike got along quite well too, come to think of it.

"Why's it all murders and missing kids?" Richie asked, flipping through more papers.

Ben swallowed, looking suddenly nervous. "Derry's not like any town I've ever been in before," he began gravely. "They did a study once... it turns out people die or disappear six times the national average."

Eddie felt his stomach clench up with something akin to fear. "You read that?" He asked.

Ben nodded slowly. "Not just grown-ups. Kids are worse. Way, *way* worse."

"Makes sense," Annie said softly. "I mean think of all the kids who've gone missing just since last October." Bill looked up sharply at that

but Annie didn't seem to be paying attention. She had instead turned her attention to her feet but Eddie got the feeling that her mind was about a million miles away. "Georgie, Cheryl Lamonica, Chad Lowe, Veronica Grogan, Jimmy Cullum, Betty Ripsom, Patrick Hockstetter. All kids that we knew?"

"Wait," Eddie blinked. "What do you mean Patrick Hockstetter?" He turned to Ben. "Didn't you say he was chasing you yesterday?"

Apparently Ben didn't know that anything had happened to Patrick either because he appeared as surprised as Eddie felt. "He was. What happened?"

Annie shrugged. "I saw a news report this morning. He was reported missing."

Silence fell over them, each of them taking a moment to let this information sink in. None of the group felt particularly upset about this, Patrick had *tortured* them after all, but it was still pretty scary to think about.

Without looking up Annie brushed her shoulder against Eddie's and even without speaking he knew she was thinking the same thing as him. She was scared too.

"I've got more stuff if you want to see it," Ben said, breaking that silence.

It seemed as if the homes of Annie's friends was a revolving set of her life. Mostly they were down in the Barrens but sometimes they would hang out in Richie's backyard or in Bill's garage or eat dinner at Stan's or suck on popsicles on Annie's back porch (they rarely hung out at Eddie's house, partially because they hated his mother breathing down their necks but mostly because Mrs. Kaspbrak *hated* Annie). It had been a long time since a new house had been added to the rotation.

There were different things Annie liked about each of her friend's homes. She liked to look through Bill's sketchbooks that he kept hidden away, liked to compare his drawings to her own, and there

were even times, on the rare occasion that it had been *only* Annie at his house, that they would draw together. She liked all the different cassette tapes that Richie had and liked, even more, when he would carelessly let her pick the music for them to listen to. She liked how Stan's father seemed to possess endless knowledge of different kinds of birds. He knew even more about birds than Stan, who seemed to perpetually be quietly pointing out a new kind to Annie who was always delighted to observe a new species.

Ben's house wasn't much like the other's. It was smaller, for one thing, sitting on the end of a quiet street. It was immediately obvious, upon walking inside, that it was only Ben and his mother living here. There were no pictures of Ben's father in recent years, only of Ben in varying ages and sometimes of Ben with his mother, a kind-looking woman who liked quite a good bit like her son. He clearly didn't have any siblings if the pictures on the wall were anything to go by.

The house, though small, was well-kept, even if the furniture was a bit dated. Most of all, though, it was entirely empty. Ben's mother, the boy explained, was at work. This was pretty strange to Annie, mostly because it seemed like *none* of her friends' mother's worked. Not even Eddie's mom who, he had explained once, spent most of her day in front of the television.

Eddie himself had lost his father when he was very young and Annie didn't know where his mother got her money from, but she had always known better than to ask.

Looking around curiously as she followed Ben to his bedroom, she couldn't help but wonder where *his* dad was but got the same sense that it would be rude to ask.

Ben was walking quite a bit faster than the rest of them, obviously trying to get to his room before the rest of them and Annie couldn't help but smile slightly. Hadn't she done that same thing, the first time her friends had seen her room, wanting to make sure there was nothing embarrassing laid out for them to see?

Deciding to let Ben have a moment, Annie wandered further, glancing into the living room and letting out a low whistle. Ben had set up a very cool looking bridge using an erector set.

"Annie?"

She glanced over her shoulder to see Eddie looking at her, gesturing her back down the hall.

"You can't just wander around people's houses," he said as she walked back towards the others.

"I was just taking a peek," she shrugged slightly. "Not like I was looking into drawers or anything. That's what Richie does."

"Do not!"

She giggled lightly before offering Eddie a toothy grin. He shook his head with a kind of affectionate exasperation.

"I heard he has a roller coaster and a chimpanzee... and the bones of an old man," Richie told them quietly all in one breath as they began to enter Ben's room.

Annie rolled her eyes. "Do you believe everything you hear?"

"Yes!"

They looked up to see Ben standing in the center of the room, one hand holding himself up as he leaned against his bed, trying to look nonchalant.

"Woah, woah, woah, *wow!*" Richie was looking past Ben at the vast amount of what appeared to be information and images of Derry pinned to his wall.

"Cool, huh?" Ben asked, sounding proud.

"No, nothing cool. There's nothing cool."

Annie glowered at her friend, who seemed mostly oblivious, before turning to Ben. "I think it's cool," she told him. He beamed at her.

"Well, this is cool... wait, no it's not..."

"What's that?" Eddie asked, pointing at a very important looking

piece of paper.

"That?" Ben stepped up, looking at the document. "That's the charter for Derry Township."

"*Nerd alert*," Richie coughed into his hand, looking quite disappointed when nobody laughed.

"Actually, it's really interesting," Ben told him. "Derry started as a beaver trapping camp."

"Still is, am I right, boys?" Richie asked, turning and raising his hand to get a high five from Stan who promptly ignored him, still looking at Ben expectantly.

"Ninety-one people signed the charter that made Derry," Ben continued. "But later that winter, they all disappeared without a trace."

"The entire camp?" Stan asked, surprised.

"There were rumors of Indians... but no sign of an attack. Everyone thought it was a plague or something.

But it's like... one day everybody just woke up and left. The only clue was a trail of clothes leading to the well-house."

Annie, who had lived in Derry for what now felt like a very long time, felt her blood run cold. She hadn't known about any of that. She knew about the Black Spot because of Mr. Hanlon and knew about the Kitchner Ironworks explosion because *everyone* knew about this. But surely if the other kids her age knew about this they would talk about it. It was *creepy*.

She thought suddenly of the Roanoke colony that they had learned about in Social Studies that year. Their teacher had started the lesson around Halloween with a secretive smile on her face, apparently delighting in how creepy her students might find it. Annie had half a mind to go tell that particular teacher that there was a *much* creepier lesson that she could have taught that hit *much* closer to home.

"Jesus," Richie whistled. "We can go on *Unsolved Mysteries*."

"Let's do it!" Eddie exclaimed. "You are brilliant!"

"Add in all the missing kids and we'd make for a perfect episode," Annie added. "Plus I mean... there's other stuff too right? Like Kitchner Ironworks. That was kind of a freak accident, wasn't it? All the equipment was shut down and it *still* exploded."

"Where was the well house?" Bill asked suddenly, looking through some projector slides that Ben had sitting on his desk.

"I don't know," Ben shrugged. "Somewhere in town, I guess. Why?"

Bill shook his head quickly. "Nothing."

They all moved to leave, walking down the front steps of Ben's house and waving goodbye at the boy, who stood in the doorway and watched them go.

She lifted her bike from where she had allowed it to fall to the ground and had started to turn it in the direction of the trainyard, even without saying anything to Eddie.

A tap on her shoulder had her turning to find Bev standing there, offering Annie a small smile. "Wanna go get some ice cream?" Bev asked. "My treat."

Annie couldn't help but feel surprised, having expected Bev to ask Bill before anyone else. And yet Bev stood there, looking hopeful.

"Um... "

"I want ice cream!" Richie interjected.

Bev barely even glanced at him. "I thought Annie and I could go look at clothes or something after," she said. "You want to go look at clothes, Richie?"

Annie understood exactly what this was suddenly. She was asking Annie because she was a *girl*.

"Sure," Annie said, offering Eddie an apologetic look. He was looking

between the two of them with a furrowed brow, expression unreadable.

Bev smiled widely at her and together the two of them started off in one direction, allowing the boys to head in the other.

Things were mostly quiet between them at first, with the two of them walking and pushing their bikes along.

"Is Eddie your boyfriend?" Bev asked finally.

Annie spluttered, turning to look at the other girl, her face turning deep red. Why was she blushing?

"I-uh... he... we... um..." She shook her head, trying to sort out her words. "We're just friends," she managed. "*Best friends.*"

"Oh, okay." Bev didn't look entirely like she believed her.

Annie wondered suddenly why Bev had asked. She thought Beverly liked Billy but maybe she had misread the situation and she *actually* liked Eddie. It would make sense. Eddie was cute and funny. Thinking about Bev potentially having a crush on Eddie though left a bad taste in Annie's mouth though.

Why though? It was weird.

"Does Bill have a girlfriend?" Bev asked hesitantly.

So Annie had been right.

"No," she shook her head. "I think he likes you though."

Bev perked up, looking almost hopeful and Annie found that she was *much* more okay with Bev liking Bill than the idea of Bev liking *Eddie*.

It's because he's my best friend, she thought determinedly. *And because I love him more than just about anybody else in the whole world.*

Yet that thought wasn't entirely convincing. *Better not to think about it*, she thought and so instead she smiled secretively at Bev.

"Bill is pretty cute, huh?" She asked.

It was Bev's turn to blush, but instead of seeming embarrassed she offered Annie a wide grin. "Yeah," she said. "He is."

Bev, Annie realized suddenly, was not nearly as intimidating as she had seemed in school. In fact, she was pretty nice.

This realization came with a sudden surge of protectiveness. Screw Greta Bowie and every nasty thing she had ever said about Bev. Beverly Marsh was perfectly nice, with an amount of confidence that was admirable. And *now* she was Annie's friend.

When Annie finally returned home that evening, she was feeling good. She had had fun hanging out with Bev. The two had gotten ice cream and then wandered around the shops in town. Annie had even bought some new books at the used book store in town, a hardback copy of *Alice in Wonderland* and a book on cars that she thought Eddie might like. She had even bought a couple of old records that they had available there for a dime.

She pushed open the front door and stepped in the house, greeting Ghost with vigorous scratches behind the ears when he came bounding down the hall to greet her.

"Annie?" She heard her father call from the living room. The television was on and he had probably been watching it while he waited for dinner to finish cooking.

"Yeah," she called back, beginning to head down the hall. She needed to check to make sure that Ghost had food and water and then she was going to head upstairs to listen to her new (well, new to her) Fleetwood Mac vinyl and read before din-

"Eddie Kaspbrak called."

She came around the corner to find her father looking at her, a strange expression on his face.

Annie blinked, surprised. "He did?" What had Eddie called about? It seemed strange that he would after they had spent most of the day

hanging out.

"Yeah, he said it was important. You might want to call him back."

Fearing the worst, Annie headed back into the front hall and picked up the phone, dialing Eddie's number from memory. It rang twice before a familiar voice picked up.

"Hello?"

"Eddie?"

"Annie." He sounded almost like he was about to cry which confirmed Annie's suspicions that something bad had happened. Was something wrong with his mother?

"What's wrong?" She asked immediately.

There was a moment of silence and Annie feared that the line had disconnected. Then, Eddie finally took a deep breath and spoke again.

"I saw something."

AUTHOR'S NOTE: Again not much to say here! Hope you enjoyed! Please read and review! I'm always so pleased to know what you guys think!

6. Stranger and Stranger

Stranger and Stranger

That morning, as Annie had sat down to rush through her breakfast with her father, he was quick to gather that something was wrong.

"Is Eddie okay?" He asked, watching her from the corner of his eye as she hurriedly ate Frosted Flakes.

She hesitated, looking up at him in surprise. She had been deep in her own thoughts and hadn't even really registered that her father was sitting there, looking through the morning paper, his own bowl of soggy cereal in front of them.

I saw something.

"Sorry?" She asked, tilting her head.

Annie, I'm scared.

Her father took his time answering, reaching forward to grab his mug of coffee and taking a long sip before asking again. "I asked if Eddie is okay," he said. "The kid sounded pretty upset when he called yesterday. Did you two have a fight or something?"

"What? No, his mom just upset him is all," Annie shrugged before bringing her bowl to her mouth to drain the leftover milk. Then she stood, taking it over to the sink to wash it. "She can be pretty overprotective sometimes and it rubs Eddie the wrong way. Anyway, I told him I'd come over early today, so I'd better go."

She turned to go, moving hurriedly from the kitchen before her dad said something else that would delay her even more. That last part wasn't a lie, she had told Eddie that she would come over early. She was *worried* about the boy and wanted to talk about what he had seen since he hadn't been willing to talk much about it over the phone.

It was at the house on Neibolt Street.

Before Annie went to Eddie's house though, she had to make a stop.

Grabbing her backpack, Annie hurried towards the front door but was stopped by the phone ringing. She hesitated, wondering who could be calling so early, before pulling it off the hook, fearing the worse. What if whatever Eddie had seen had decided to come back?

What if it had gotten him?

"Hello?"

"Annie?"

She blinked, brow furrowing in confusion.

"Beverly?"

She heard her new friend sigh in relief. A feeling of dread began to pool in Annie's stomach and she began to wonder just what the *hell* was going on.

"Do you.... do you think you and the guys could come to my house today?" Bev asked. "I need to show you something. Not now!" She added quickly. "Around noon."

A moment of silence followed before Annie finally spoke. "Yeah," she said. "Yeah, I'll get them to come."

"Thank you, Annie."

And with that, they hung up and Annie stood there for a moment longer, wondering if it wouldn't be better, after all, to just head back upstairs and climb back into bed and forget everything that had happened. Eddie hadn't seen anything and Bev didn't have anything to show them and kids weren't missing and dying in Derry and everything was normal.

But Eddie is scared. And so are you.

She had to go, and so she went, pushing open the front door and stepping out into the early morning sunlight. The sound of a whimper from behind her had Annie turning to find Ghost pressing his nose against the screen door, looking pitiful.

"No Ghost," Annie shook her head. "It's too dangerous. Stay home."

Unused to being told to stay home, Ghost sat tilting his head in confusion and Annie felt a pang in her heart. But it wasn't safe for Ghost to come where she was going and Annie didn't think she would be able to stand if something happened to her dog.

He whined again as Annie turned to leave, not stopping to look back at him. She grabbed her bike and began to ride down the street, pausing only to wave at Mr. Hanlon and Mike who were outside, already getting an early start on chores.

"Good morning!" She called. They waved back and Annie continued on her way. She had told Eddie that she would be over as soon as possible but her curiosity was practically killing her and though her common sense said that she should stay far away from the house on Neibolt Street, she couldn't help herself.

She turned her bike like she was heading towards the trainyard but when she reached the corner, instead of turning right she turned left.

Every kid in Derry knew about the house on Neibolt Street. Nobody had lived in it for as long as Annie had lived in Derry and even for a long time before that. There were all sorts of rumors about the place that had been spread through school. Richie Tozier liked to claim that there were all manners of drug deals taking place inside and that teenagers liked to use the abandoned house as a place to hook up.

Annie supposed to first one might be true, but couldn't imagine that there was anybody in the world who wanted to get naked in a place like *this*. It looked like you would need a tetanus shot just from stepping inside (Eddie had said that once and Annie was inclined to agree).

According to her father, homeless people and tramps liked to stay inside the house and had warned Annie away from the place, disliking the number of beer bottles littering the front yard, clear evidence of the types of people who frequented the run-down house. He had told her they were nothing but a bunch of drunk vagrants inside and if Annie ventured too close they might do something really bad.

His words had scared her badly but they had also served their purpose. Annie gave the house a wide berth usually, only passing by occasionally when she and Eddie headed to the train yard, though they often opted to take the long way around.

With her heart pounding in her chest, Annie parked her bike, putting down the kickstand, before walking to the front gate, peering past it critically.

The sunflowers bobbing in the front yard seemed almost friendly, like they were saying hello. In fact, they seemed to urge Annie onward.

Come on in, Annie. It's not so bad here. Just a little bit messy but it's nothing you can't fix. There are no fighting parents here, Annie, and no dead sisters either. Won't you come in and stay awhile, Annie?

Yes, she thought, distantly. *Maybe I will.*

She pushed open the front gate and stepped into the yard, eyes set on the front door. Her heart felt like it had settled somewhere in her throat now but she hardly noticed as she continued to walk forward, almost in a daze.

"Hello?" She called. Her voice sounded very small, almost pitiful.

The sound of something moving over broken glass had her freezing, eyes scanning the front of the house in a panic.

The skittering of many legs brought her suddenly back to herself, just as something large and hairy emerged from beneath the front porch.

She stared at it, and it seemed to stare right back and Annie was close enough to see herself reflected in its eight eyes.

Christ, she thought, her breaths beginning to become panicked. *It's a goddamn spider!*

Annie *hated* spiders, had always hated spiders ever since she was a little and her older cousin had told her about a friend who had died after getting bitten by a brown recluse.

Spiders can kill you, she had asked in wide-eyed amazement. That

night, when she had found a fresh spider web in the corner of her bedroom she had screamed and screamed, certain that it was going to come to kill her.

Now, she thought, *this one probably was going to kill her*. This wasn't just any spider. It was huge, giant even, at least as big as Ghost. God, why hadn't she listened to her dad?

Annie began to back away, making a horrified noise in the back of her throat. She was reminded suddenly of the shark. Hadn't it had the same horrible shiny, shiny black eyes.

And hadn't she been in the same position then, running away from something she had been scared of since she was very small.

Gonna getcha, Annie! Gonna killya!

"No!" She yelled, still backpedaling. Her foot struck one of those empty beer bottles her father was always eyeing with disdain and she toppled over, landing on her back.

She had never been so scared in her life as she was at that moment, with that giant spider skittering closer. A sob tore free of her throat and distantly, Annie realized she was crying.

Eddie had told her he had seen something and Annie had idiotically come investigating. What had she expected to find here? Smoke and mirrors? Evidence that somebody was tricking them?

Eddie would realize that something had happened before any of the others. He might even figure out what she had done and come looking for her but Annie hoped he wouldn't. Then, Bev would realize when they didn't show up at her house.

Eddie would let her parents know, of course, so maybe she would be reported missing before the day was over but Annie didn't think it would do much good. She had a feeling that if she was lost now then she would never be found.

This is what's happening to the others, she realized, rising up onto her elbows and trying to scramble back, away from the creature.

She needed to get up, needed to get to her feet. That was the only way she was going to get away. But even as that realization hit her, the command didn't seem to reach the rest of her body.

It was at her feet now and began to climb up her body. As soon as it touched her, it was like a switch went off in Annie and she began to scream.

She screamed and screamed and began to squirm, managing to gather her legs up to her chest and, realizing this was likely her last chance, a last-ditch effort. Annie couldn't waste it.

She lashed out with both legs, delivering a powerful kick to the spider's face. She heard the telltale *squish* sound and recognized, even as she was clambering to her feet that she had kicked it so hard that some of its eyes had burst.

Her stomach turned but she couldn't stop to think about that disgusting fact. She had to *move*.

The spider let out a ragged cry of pain just as Annie began to run, heading back the way she had come. She heard the sound of it moving again and then there was a distant kind of pain as it clamped down on the bare skin of Annie's leg.

"No!" She cried. She was going to get away! She *had* to! She was so close!

"NO!" She yelled again, delivering another swift kick to the spider. It gave a meaty *thwack* before sailing across the yard, lighter than it looked.

She didn't hesitate to see where it landed, she was flying, making a break for her bike. Despite her better judgment, she hesitated when she wrapped her hands around the handlebars, glancing over her shoulder to make sure it wasn't following behind. What she saw instead made her gasps.

Standing in the yard, offering a wide smile, was a clown. Blood dripped down from his mouth. *Her blood*, Annie realized. *He* had been the spider.

"Where are you going, Annie Bell?" He asked. "I thought we were having fun."

Maybe it was the fact that he had called her Annie Bell that made another sob tear forth from her throat. Eddie was the only one who ever called her that. How had he known?

"I'll tell Amy you said hello!" The clown called as Annie climbed onto the bike. This time, she did not look back.

Her leg throbbed painfully and she felt blood dripping down her leg, staining her sock red. Her mother would have something to say about that later if Annie didn't sneak the sock into the trash. She couldn't think about that now, had to think about moving *faster*.

She had seen a *clown*. Hadn't Amy said something about a clown before she died.

The clown had said *Amy's* name. A dull sense of rage began to beat in Annie's chest. How did he know about Amy? How the *fuck* did he know about Amy.

There was a clown outside my window last night, Annie.

She had thought Amy had dreamed that or else hallucinated it because there was no way a *clown* had been outside her window on the *third* floor.

Now, she wasn't so sure.

IT watched the girl go, something akin to disappointment washing over IT. IT had hoped for a tasty, tasty meal but it was no matter. Better to wait. The meat always tasted better that way.

IT had wanted the sister first, had sensed her fear when IT had first awakened after It's long, long sleep. The girl was already going to die, IT had just wanted to get there first.

But the girl hadn't been scared of IT, not really. And that made all the difference. Still, having lost out of *one* easy meal had left a rotten feeling in IT's mouth.

Perhaps this girl could serve as the consolation prize.

She certainly *tasted* delicious, her blood sickly sweet in IT's mouth. IT hadn't gotten her sister, but Annie would do just fine.

IT began to slink back towards the house, already changing shape once more.

IT had gotten a taste of her, and she would not escape in the end.

Eddie waited impatiently on his front steps, looking first up his street and then down, waiting for the familiar sight of Annie's hair glinting gold in the sunlight.

She always came from the right, but that didn't stop him from looking to the left expectantly. Annie was *late*. Eddie had expected her to be here by now and the fact that she wasn't filled him with dread. Had something happened?

The sound of a bike horn sounding off had him standing up just in time to see Annie round the corner. She was pedaling like hell like she couldn't outrun something fast enough and as she parked her bike on the sidewalk, Eddie saw that her leg was bleeding.

"Annie?"

He stepped down off of his porch and Annie moved towards him quickly, not saying anything as she threw her arms around him and buried her face into his shoulder. She nearly knocked him over with the abruptness of the hug.

And then she started to cry.

"Annie, *what happened? Are you okay?*"

Stupid question. She clearly wasn't.

Casting a glance over his shoulder to make sure his mother was not nosily peeking out the window, Eddie peeled her away from him so he could get a look at her face.

"Annie Bell?" He prompted which caused her to begin to cry harder.

Panicking, Eddie immediately pulled her back into a hug, shushing her gently, already beginning to suspect what she had done.

"You went to Neibolt?" He asked and though she said nothing, her slow nod was all the response he needed.

"Why would you do that?" He asked immediately. "After I told you I saw something, you what... decided to go and check? *Why* would you do that, Annie?"

She pulled back, worrying her lip between her teeth. "I just... after what happened with the shark, I needed to see."

Eddie frowned at her, glancing down at her bleeding leg, before sighing heavily and pulling her up to sit on the porch. He leaned down to examine her leg, brushing the wound gently. Two years ago the sight of blood would have turned his stomach but now he powered through because Annie needed him and there was nobody else for her to turn to.

The wound had mostly stopped bleeding, but Eddie had no idea what could have caused it in the first place.

"I'm going to go get some bandages," he told her, standing quickly before hurrying inside.

His mother sat in her chair in the living room, watching television, but looked up when Eddie walked in.

"What's wrong, Eddie Bear?" She asked.

He shook his head, already edging down the hall. "Just have to go to the bathroom," he said before taking off and shutting himself inside the bathroom, beginning to look into the medicine cabinet and under the sink, pulling out a roll of gauze bandages, antiseptic, and a box of gauze pads. He stuffed these things into his fanny pack before flushing the toilet and letting the water run in the sink for a moment, so his mother would believe his lie, before stepping out again and hurrying back towards the front door.

"Are you leaving again?" His mother asked.

He hesitated, knowing she would ask for a kiss, but he didn't want to leave Annie waiting any longer. She had been *crying* for God's sake and was obviously terrified.

"Yes Mommy," he said, moving towards her immediately and pressing a quick kiss to her cheek before she could even ask. "Love you!"

And then he was gone, hurrying back outside to find Annie exactly where he had left her, her legs pulled up to her chest and her knees tucked beneath her chin, almost like a shield.

He sat down across from her and began to rifle through his fanny pack to pull out the supplies he had just retrieved. "Let me see," he told her and she slowly stuck her leg out towards him.

"What did you see?" Annie asked quietly.

Eddie furrowed his brow, taking a moment to focus on bandaging her wound but also trying to gather his words. The day before, when he had called her, he had been in much the same state as she was now, though he had escaped without a wound. He had gotten home and the *only* thing he had wanted was to talk to his best friend, but she had still been with Beverly.

When she had called back, he had felt a deep sense of relief. Just being able to *tell* someone that he had seen something made the whole thing less scary. He had promised to tell her *what* he had seen this morning when he could be sure that his mother wouldn't eavesdrop.

"A man," he began, dampening a gauze pad with the antiseptic and beginning to clean the wound. Annie flinched, starting to move away, but Eddie grabbed her ankle, holding her still. "A leper. He was *disgusting* Annie. All covered in wounds and sores and pus and shit. He was the grossest thing I have ever seen. I was so sure that if he touched me then I would get sick too. He chased me into the yard of *that* house and when I looked back..." He paused, knowing this next bit sounded crazy. Not that the rest of it didn't though.

"When you looked back... what?" Annie prompted, watching his face carefully with those big blue eyes of hers. "A clown?"

He looked up sharply. "How did you know?"

Stupid question. There was only *one* way that she would have known that, and that was if she had seen the same thing herself.

"I saw the clown only... he didn't start out as a clown," she shook her head slowly, disbelievingly. "It was a giant *spider* Eddie, and it *bit* me."

So that explained the wound. Wincing slightly, Eddie began to wrap the bandage carefully around her leg. It had *bit* her? First the shark, then the leper, then the spider. How did this make any sense?

"He... knew about Amy," Annie said suddenly. "He told me... he told me he would say hello to her. What does that *mean*, Eddie?"

Amy was a touchy subject for Annie and had been for as long as he had known her. For the most part, Eddie could breach the subject without any fear of repercussions, but nobody else was afforded the same privilege.

Amy had died the October before, within a week of Georgie Denbrough's disappearance, finally succumbing to the cancer that had plagued her body since she was very small. The chemotherapy had stopped working and, though her family had known for weeks that the end was coming, it hadn't made it any easier.

Eddie knew that Annie was still dealing with the aftershocks of Amy's death, knew that her mom spent most of her time sleeping these days and that her dad spent most of his time working and that Annie spent most of her time when she was at home alone. But in those days following Amy's death, Annie had spent her time down in the Barrens, crying while Eddie did his best to comfort her.

He and their friends had dutifully split up their attention, with Eddie comforting Annie and Richie comforting Bill and Stan dividing his time between the two. She hadn't spoken much about Amy since that time, quietly allowing Bill's grief and anger over Georgie's

disappearance to overcome her grief over her poor, dead sister.

The difference, she had told Eddie once, was that Bill believed they could find Georgie, but Annie knew that Amy was gone.

"How would he know about Amy?" Eddie asked, staring at her.

She shook her head quickly, looking like she might cry again.

"Eddie," She sounded very small when she spoke his name. "I'm scared." She reached out and grabbed his hand, giving it a squeeze.

Eddie was scared too. Annie seeing the clown confirmed that it wasn't just a figment of Eddie's imagination. It meant that everything that had happened the day before wasn't *just* in his head. He squeezed her hand back.

"I think... I think Beverly saw something too," Annie continued.

It was hard to describe the feeling that began to curdle in Eddie's belly then. It had been *Beverly* that Annie had left with the afternoon before and *Beverly* had apparently confided in Annie that she had seen something. Probably, the two of them had more in common than Annie and Eddie did. They were both *girls* and Eddie suspected that went a long way towards making their newfound friendship.

Eddie didn't mind so much that Annie had a crush on Bill instead of him, he almost expected it. But the thought of somebody else taking his spot as her best friend made him feel as if he might be sick.

"When did she tell you this?" Eddie asked carefully, hiding any resentment he might feel.

"She called me this morning before I left. I told her we'd go by her house around noon."

Eddie nodded and stood. "We'd better go get the others then," he said.

Annie hesitated, biting her lip again like she always did when she got nervous. "I don't... I don't want to tell the others," she said. "What if they don't believe us?"

Eddie stared at her for a moment, debating. On the one hand, it felt wrong to keep this from their friends, but on the other, he knew exactly where she was coming from. The thought of telling the others about the shark or the leper or the spider or the clown and having Richie laugh in their faces was enough to have him nodding.

"Yeah," he said. "Yeah, okay."

"So what was it that she said again?" Richie asked as the group pedaled towards the apartment building where Bev lived with her father.

Annie rolled her eyes, exchanging an exasperated look with Stan. She got along with Richie, she *loved* Richie just like she loved all of her friends, but there were times when he could drive you absolutely batshit.

Of all of her friends Annie, of course, got along best with Eddie but besides Eddie, she probably got along best with Stan. There was just something about his quiet manner of thoughtfulness that made him easy to hang around.

She got along well with Richie too, she supposed, if you didn't count all of their teasing and bickering, and she, of course, got along with Bill.

The new additions of Bev and Ben into their group were a bit jarring, most because Annie was not sure how she would get along with either, though if the previous afternoon was any indication she and Beverly would get on just fine.

Ben was a bit harder to predict though. He was even quieter than Stan and kept to himself more. Annie suspected it would be pretty hard to get him out of his shell.

"*I told you*, Richie," Annie said impatiently, "she just said she wanted to show us something."

"She didn't t-tell you *what* she w-wa-wanted to show us?" Bill asked.

"Is it more than what the two of you showed us at the quarry?" Richie

asked, sounding surprised as Annie felt her face heat up.

"Shut up! Just shut up, Richie!" Stan snapped as they turned their bikes and pulled up alongside the apartment building.

Bev was already waiting for them outside, sitting on the fire escape and smoking a cigarette. When she saw them she immediately stood and began to climb down to greet them.

"You came," she said, sounding relieved. She looked them all over before glancing uncertainly up at the apartment. "My dad will kill me if he finds out that I had boys in the apartment," she explained, wringing the hem of her shirt between her hands nervously.

"W-w-w-w-we'll leave a lookout," Bill said, already starting towards the apartment. "Now Richie, just stay here," he barely spared a glance at the other boy. The others began to follow after him, except for Richie who sat on his bike and stared after them.

"Woah, woah, woah, what if her dad comes back?" He called.

Stan paused, turning to look at their friend. "Do what you always do," he replied. "Start talking."

"It is a gift," Richie called back weakly.

As they climbed the fire-escape, Annie and Stan exchanged amused smiles, knowing Richie wouldn't take it too personally.

There was a worried look in Stan's eye and part of Annie suspected that he knew that something was going on with her, though also knew that he likely didn't know to what extent. He wouldn't ask, she knew. Stan was more the type to wait for somebody to come to him with a problem, probably thinking that he was being nosy otherwise.

Annie appreciated that about him.

She climbed in through the window after Eddie, looking around at what she correctly assumed to be Bev's living room.

It was decorated pretty sparsely, not a whole lot of pictures on the wall or anything. Actually, the whole room came off as pretty

depressing.

Like she had with Ben's father, Annie suspected that Bev's mother was not in the picture, though knew better than to ask. That would probably seem rude, and Annie had been brought up better than that. So instead she kept her mouth shut, following after the others as Bev led them down the hallway, towards what Annie assumed must be the bathroom.

As they approached, a feeling of dread rose up from her stomach into her chest and then into her throat. In front of her, Eddie paused, turning to give Annie a panicked look. He was likely having the same misgivings that she was.

Bev had sounded so grave on the phone that morning and now... Annie thought that she probably didn't want to see what Bev had to show them at all.

"In there... " Bev tilted her head towards the door and for the first time, Annie noticed there was a strange reddish light shining from beyond.

"What is it?" Bill asked.

"You'll see."

"Great," Eddie began, taking a deep breath, "bringing us to the bathroom. You know that 89% of the worst accidents occur in the bathroom and kitchen. And that's where all the bacteria and fungi are... and it is not a hygienic place... "

Annie stepped forward, grabbing his hand in her's. He trailed off, his other hand automatically twitching towards his fanny back, just in case his asthma kicked up and he needed his inhaler. He was a ball of nervous energy right now, Annie knew because she herself was a ball of nervous energy. The only difference was that when Eddie got too nervous, the feeling was also accompanied by an asthma attack.

Slowly, Bill reached forward to push open the bathroom door and it swung forward with an ominous creak.

The red glow had not been caused by a red light, Annie realized

immediately, but rather the existing light reflecting off all of the blood.

It covered every available surface, thick and crimson and congealed, and the whole room stank unmistakably of it. Annie's stomach turned dangerously, and for a split second, she was certain she was going to be sick.

"I knew it!" Eddie exclaimed, paling slightly. His grip on Annie's hand tightened.

"Do you see it?" Bev asked nervously, looking at them one by one.

She was met with expressions of mixed shock, horror, and disgust.

Bill nodded slowly, stepping past her. "Yes. What happened in here?"

Bev swallowed, following after him, leaving the others standing out in the hall, staring at the room with disdain.

"My dad couldn't see it, I thought that I might be crazy."

Annie and Eddie glanced at each other, exchanging meaningful looks. Things just kept getting stranger and stranger. And yet, they both kept their mouths shut. Blood in a bathroom and seeing the things they saw were not exactly the same, and they were both still hesitant to bring it up.

"Well if you're crazy," Stan began, "then we're all crazy."

"We c-c-c-can't leave it like this," Bill told the others determinedly.

Annie grimaced. That was just like Bill, to volunteer them for something that none of them were exactly happy to partake in.

From beside her, Eddie was fumbling for his inhaler and Annie felt her stomach flip at the idea of stepping foot inside that bathroom. There was *so much blood*. Part of her, a rather large part, wanted to turn tail and run.

Sorry Bev, no bloody bathrooms for me today, thanks.

"I'll call the cleaning lady," Annie offered, earning a weak round of laughter from her friends. Even Eddie, who looked like he might throw up at any second gave a light chuckle, and with a deep breath, Annie steeled herself with a new resolve.

"Where do you keep your cleaning supplies, Bev?" She asked with a heavy sigh.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: A little later than I've generally been trying to post them but I literally forgot it was Thursday until like 11:30 last night and then I had to edit the chapter but yeah, here it is! I appreciate the reviews and follows/favorites this story has gotten and would love if you guys left more! If you're interested in seeing any of the edits I've made for this story or anything that has been made for me, you can head over to my Tumblr [harleyquinnzelz . tumblr . com](https://www.tumblr.com/harleyquinnzelz)! See you guys next week!